

# abducted

## The Betrayal

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# acknowledgements

For everyone who has read any word I have written.

Without you reading, there is no point writing.

LC

# The Story So Far...

Twenty-five strangers were taken from their homes, places of work and their beds throughout different periods of history. They awoke inside strange domed chambers within a strange facility deep in a strange, overgrown jungle. Two suns in the sky suggest they were abducted by aliens and left to die on a distant world.

Led by a primary school teacher battling personal demons, the group escape their prisons to discover they are the only survivors amongst dozens of corpses. Alone in an abandoned facility losing power with no signs of their abductors, they have no clues about the motivation for their abduction. If they hope to survive, they must work together to unravel the mysteries of their surroundings.

Half the group, commanded by an inexperienced Sergeant in the USA Marine Corps, leave to explore the wilderness. They follow a path deep into the jungle until reaching an impassable river. Crossing it almost proves fatal and the marine's mistakes escalate into rebellion climaxing when one of the group is accidentally shot. After an uneasy night on the bank of the river, the troubled marine wakes up to discover half of the group have disappeared.

The remaining abductees attempt to survive in the facility they label "Carbonek" as power begins to fail. A few begin to challenge the leadership of the brave teacher who saved them.

Whilst a small team discover they are living at the base of a volcano, the teacher finds the source of the power failures that is on the brink of a chain reaction which almost results in the volcano erupting. He manages to stop the overload but moments later his team fall from a bridge that crumbles beneath their feet, plunging them towards a watery death. All this happens with the remainders oblivious to an alien lurking in their midst.

For more information, read  
Books One & Two in  
"abducted: The Awakening".

## book three

The day man trusts the wind  
to sail him down the path of righteousness  
is the day man forgets how to walk the path.



## one

Gareth Oakley felt his eyelids flickering before he could feel anything else. He was swimming in the depths of a strange dream and needed a few grey moments to understand that he was still alive.

The dream was patchy but Bryony James played the starring role. The elegant movie star was shouting, screaming almost. Was she screaming at him? Maybe. The potency of her inexpressible beauty seemed to make his eyes ache in this dreamlike state.

Another voice echoed over a roaring sound, a coarse voice filled with panic crying 'shoot'. There was a flash of fear across Bryony's blue eyes and Gareth awoke from this bizarre dream just as a strangely familiar gun appeared between them...

*'Gareth!'*

He snapped into consciousness and felt numb pain shooting up his right arm, which had folded awkwardly beneath his body. Sprawled face down, a small puddle of blood was congealing carelessly against his face. Vision shifted out of focus, wild washes of blue blurring the shadowy scene beneath him.

He had been crossing the stone bridge that connected two sides of the engine room, an underground cavern controlling a volcano (it sounded even crazier as a semi-conscious reflection). They had just saved the day by stopping pressure from a subterranean magma source causing an eruption. Job done, they started back to Base Camp. Matthew Somerset and Michael Leigh had been a few paces ahead when that noise...

The bridge had collapsed.

He had fallen.

Fallen towards...

Gareth's vision shifted back into focus and his heart stalled when he realised what his blood was congealing on beneath him.

The river they had noticed beneath the bridge, right at the base of the cavern, was still gushing past at a frantic pace. It flowed just a few inches beneath him but there appeared to be nothing between Gareth and the river. Foam was lashing up at him even though he should be drowning in it.

His refocused senses confirmed that he was suspended in mid-air barely a foot above the river.

‘We should be d-dead.’

He glanced up through a thick, heavy air and his eyesight blurred again until the quivering frame of a young World War I medic with curly brown hair was outlined for him. Tears streamed down Michael Leigh's cherubic face but his eyes could not even blink as he gazed down. To Gareth, it looked like he was kneeling on some imperceptible floor, a transparent platform above the water.

Gareth glanced back to the ground that was not beneath him. A jumble of irrational thoughts washed over his mind, a cyclone of confusion to sweep away reality. His eyes flicked back towards the maroon puddle and his hand strayed to the bleeding wound over his eyebrow.

‘A force-field,’ he croaked, phlegm fighting into his throat. ‘An invisible barrier protecting the river. Like the one that stopped us leaving Carbonek. Perhaps we turned it on when the power came back.’

Michael could not drag his gaze from the river. He looked so small in his tattered green uniform, like a child dressing up in adult clothes. Gareth felt the cyclone dissipating enough for a familiar voice to return to frame his thoughts.

*Well, Gaz, to what do we owe this miracle? You were dead, mate, as good as dead. Plunging head first thirty feet into a river; I can't think of any force – divine or otherwise – that could explain this one.*

Gareth spun around, suddenly remembering three people had fallen from the bridge.

It was dark despite the reflection of the water. The river was as wide as whatever indescribable force held them above it. Gareth noticed rubble and dust scattered nearby, remnants of the bridge that mockingly collapsed underfoot. Between two large lumps of stonework was an outstretched arm as still as the stone.

‘Matt?’



Gareth began moving before his legs could recall their function. He slipped as the wound on his head gave way to giddiness, stumbling forward across the unseen force field. He sensed Michael following but his senses had been shocked, making the impossible trek over the river arduous.

He reached the coalminer's body and collapsed, feeling the invisible ground sloping away slightly. Tears started to form in his own eyes as he reached his good arm over to the broad neck of Matthew, grazing his grimy black beard.

His fingers found a pulse and a relieved sigh escaped his lips. 'He's alive. Thank God.'

A miracle, undoubtedly. Michael pushed past, his meekness forgotten and duty driving his instincts. His limited medical training returned and he checked the towering coalminer while Gareth scoped their surroundings.

The river flowed from and to pure darkness. A pale glow enveloped them, reflecting down from the engine room high above along with a sticky film of heat. The rippling of the water was being muted by whatever was protecting it; Gareth could almost make out a curved line above the centre of the river. The shape reminded him of the plastic domes of the chambers that the abductees had all woken up inside at the start of this nightmare.

'I-I think he's all right,' the words softly left Michael's bloody mouth without his knowledge, 'though his heart rate is s-slow and I'm not sure if he's b-broken something. Look at his leg.'

Gareth glanced at Matthew's left leg, which had twisted slightly in an awkward direction. 'Can we move him?'

'I w-wouldn't, his l-l-leg...'

'Michael, I don't know how long this thing might hold,' he interrupted, signalling towards the invisible dome. He sensed calmness in his words even though he had never felt so...

*What's the word, Gaz? Frightened, anxious, confused? Exhilarated? This is a little beyond your scope of experiences in the classroom, right?*

He turned away but the voice inside his head was relentless.

*Face it, all you really do is screw up your own life. Drink yourself to death, destroy the people you love, exist without living. You've never experienced life at a normal pace so how could you be expected to cope when the dials are all cranked up like this?*

'Gareth?'

*Look at him. That kid has seen more in his short service for his country than you have in your whole life. He doesn't look much older than your pupils yet he endured the deaths of honourable men in his arms while you sunk beers and played video games depicting Michael's war. Look at him and know he's better than you!*

'We need to move him now,' Gareth answered resolutely. 'If this thing – whatever it is – disappears, we'll fall into the river and we're dead if that happens. Stay here while I find something to help, okay?'

Michael heard the tones in his voice and new strength reflected in the young medic's eyes.

Gareth began crawling carefully over the invisible dome, willing his eyes to sharpen in order to cut through the dimness. As the dome sloped away, shapes of rock replaced the darkness. They merged into a stone ridge that ran alongside the river with water splashing against the underside of the dome as it sloped down between ridge and river.

Beyond that, nothing but shades of shadow.

*You need to get out of here, Gaz. You've solved the power problem but you made a promise to get everyone home. If you want to fulfil that promise, you'll have to put aside the man you were and become someone capable of keeping his promises.*

That little demon inside him was right (as usual, unfortunately). For the first time in his life, people depended on him and not like the children in his primary school class depended on him for an education. Survival was the goal and he had promised to deliver.

*First, let's get back to Carbonek. You saved the group from an erupting volcano, maybe now you'll be able to find the way home.*

On that hopeful note, he slid the last few feet off the invisible dome and landed on something he could see as well as feel. The ridge was narrow and followed the river into darkness in either direction. A rock wall lined the ridge, reflecting oppressive heat towards him. Some remnants of the bridge had bounced off the dome but otherwise there was nothing of...

Gareth's eyes finally returned to their old sharpness and he spotted a shape in the darkness several metres away. He trudged wearily towards it, nursing his numb arm. The shape took on a form which made him stop mid-step, breath wedged in the back of his throat.

The shape was the largest of several. Smaller shapes included a miniscule mound of ash that was once a fire, a shrivelled lump that

looked like a decomposed sack and two long metal pikes propped against the wall, rusted from the humidity.

It was the largest shape that snatched his breath.

It sat peacefully against the wall, head tilted like it had been watching his approach. There were deep sockets where eyes should be but with the flesh rotted away, even the narrow skull was faded and crumbled. It sat inside a metal jacket similar to a suit of armour but only bone and dust remained of its body.

Heat leant strength to the pungent stench of death and the cyclone finally overcame him. Gareth threw up beside the decayed remains of the first alien he had ever seen.



## two

Bryony James swallowed the scream threatening to leap from her throat and started running. It was too late. Claire Stewart, the thirteen-year-old Cardiff schoolgirl who had been sleeping peacefully on her chamber bed when the power returned, was still stirring as the plastic dome slammed shut on top of her.

Hindered by her restricting black cocktail dress, Bryony reached the chamber seconds too late and slammed her fist on its metal rim. She grasped the frame of the dome and tried pulling it open in vain. The sound of venting steam that had filled Base Camp as all fifty-six domes shut simultaneously was dissipating but the chambers remained closed.

*What do you do, dear?* her mother's voice sounded mocking rather than concerned. *What can you do when you're alone with nobody to protect you? You are a frightened, foolish girl who thinks she's an actress but all you really do is ruin your own life. You're a disgrace disguised as a lie.*

Bryony hesitated long enough to banish that voice from her mind before flinging long blonde hair from her immaculately formed face and turning in search of help.

The laboratory everyone had labelled Base Camp seemed strangely empty with all the chambers shut and so few abductees left. When this nightmare had begun, twenty-five survivors had once shared this room. But the Explorers had left, Patrick Barrie's group were exploring the countryside while Anna Forbes and Denise Newton were undertaking a little 'project' for Gareth who had apparently succeeded in restoring power to the facility.

An act which had restarted all the chambers, trapping the schoolgirl from Cardiff inside one again.

'What do we do?'

Bryony stared at the only two abductees left in Base Camp. The Texan woman, Emily Wade, looked as frightened as Bryony felt while the French farm girl called Juliette looked more confused than scared. Three women alone with a trapped girl and no way to free her.

‘Bryony,’ Emily addressed her again with a shaky voice, ‘what do we do?’

*Yes, what do you do, dear?*

‘We have to get the chambers open.’

Bryony strode past both women and headed towards the four strange tables on the far side of the laboratory. Emily and Juliette followed her quietly so that only the sound of Claire banging on the inside of her chamber echoed off the elliptical leather walls.

At the tables, she hesitated.

She remembered Gareth’s masterful control of the situation on their first day in this twisted version of Hell. He had freed them all from these chambers, led them through the alien facility and into the jungle without even seeming to register his own strength and integrity. Everything happened naturally for him that day; he had gained their trust and become their leader before anybody even realised they needed one.

But he was gone; she was alone.

Memories of Gareth’s strength seemed to seep into her suddenly, as though the example he had set was one she instinctively wanted to follow. As Emily and Juliette arrived beside her, she drew in a deep breath.

‘Let’s think this through, shall we?’ she started, forcing serenity into her voice. ‘When we came into this lab the first time, the power was still on and the chambers were closed. Right? Gareth found a button where the symbol matched one underneath the chambers.’

Emily nodded. ‘So you just have to find the same symbol as before, right?’

Bryony fixed the Texan’s eyes. The prim wife of a millionaire had made practically no contribution to the group apart from whining and complaining at every opportunity. It seemed typical for a woman middle-aged and invested in hiding it. Though life as an abductee was a dramatic change for everyone, most had at least embraced the camaraderie required to survive.

Not Emily Wade.

‘We can do this,’ Bryony replied, feeling her jaw tighten as she bit back her anger towards the woman. ‘One of us needs to find the symbol and shout it out while someone else presses the right button.’

Emily recoiled as it dawned on her what the last statement implied. She glanced at the little French peasant from 1591 but Juliette was having difficulty following anything. There was no way out of this for the esteemed wife of Randall Francis Wade.

‘Fine, y’all find the symbol and I’ll press the damned button.’

Bryony heard reluctance underlying those words but she did not have time to argue. The frightened sobbing of the trapped schoolgirl was softly filling the room.

She pushed past the others and jogged towards the nearest chamber. It was a thing of beauty from the outside; the perfect symmetry of the transparent dome, a bright turquoise glow of power in the trunk-like legs, the yellow metal framework complimenting the buff-coloured skin. No matter what aesthetic value these contraptions held, they were still dangerous.

Bryony began rushing around the sides of the chamber, reaching over the dome and leaning under the base in search of that symbol. A recollection of Anna Forbes dancing around the same dome flashed across her mind and she knelt at the head of the chamber.

‘Found it,’ she yelled, ‘under the hinge. It’s a line that swirls from right to left all the way down, getting smaller as it goes. There’s a half-crescent moon in the background but the ends of the crescent turn back up towards the top of the symbol.’

There was a long pause.

‘Emily?’

‘Just a minute, I’m looking.’

‘Hurry.’

Still kneeling, she glanced through the maze of chambers in the direction of the screaming. Her eyes widened in horror as a flare of light flared up beneath the plastic dome and the frightened screams of the trapped girl stopped abruptly.

‘Found it,’ Emily squealed.

‘Press it now!’

The fear in Bryony’s cry must have prompted Emily into pressing the button. She heard the Texan screech just as a spark shot up from the

tables and the sound of escaping steam returned. Within seconds, a series of clicks echoed around Base Camp and the domes began to open again.

Bryony had half a second to enjoy relief and delight together in a delirious cocktail. She had managed to resolve the problem and proved she could survive such an incredible situation (even if Gareth had set the precedent for that particular puzzle). If only her mother could see her now...

When that half second passed, panic returned to the foreground of her mind. Pulling herself to her bare feet, she scrambled between rising domes towards Claire's chamber and arrived just as all fifty-six reached their vertical position.

Claire was unconscious.

The little red-head in the grey uniform was laid out across the foam mattress inside, her eyes closed. Her freckles contrasted her pale skin abruptly. Bryony felt horror escalate to terror for a moment but when she noticed Claire's stomach contract to the beat of her breathing, she allowed the terror to fade.

'She's all right,' she called back towards the others, too weak and worried to get her voice louder than a sigh. 'She's unconscious but she's breathing. Claire, hun, you okay?'

Bryony reached down and lifted her carefully into a shaky hug. The child's breathing felt soft yet regular in her grasp; maybe she had fainted from anxiety or something. Michael would have to give her a check-up when he got back but at least she was alive.

*Don't count this as anything other than dumb luck, that voice returned in bitter tones. The next one, you may not be so lucky.*

*Shut up, mother; this means Gareth's fixed the power and we can finally go home. Our luck is changing.*

She hugged Claire before laying her down gently. She would need the others to help move her out of the chamber, just in case something else happened. For a mismatched trio of woman taken from different times, they had made a good team.

When she turned back to the tables, Emily and Juliette could not be seen.

Frowning, Bryony glanced around the rest of Base Camp. With all the chamber domes raised, her view was obstructed but there was no sign of either woman. A faint sound of muffled sobbing suddenly disturbed the silence. She jogged back to the four elliptical tables across the room.



As she arrived, she could finally see the two women on the floor behind the tables. The poorly clothed peasant was kneeling with tears flowing breathlessly down her face. Her arms curled around her quivering body as she stared at Emily Wade's pale, wide-eyed corpse.



## three

Patrick Barrie's internal organs jumped around inside him as he skipped down the side of the volcano (an activity he never dreamed he would undertake). His thinning hair bounced in time with his sagging stomach and his heart quivered like a bagpipe player's breath on the long notes but the pain did not register. All he could think about was finding Gareth Oakley.

'Patrick, stop,' echoed behind him; Christopher Veroni's voice in pursuit.

'No...time...' he huffed in such a weak voice that he could barely hear his own words.

Morning was slipping into afternoon as heavy clouds encroached from the north, growing more foreboding as they drew closer. The winding path along the eastern slope of the volcano was easier to descend than it had been to ascend. If he really had no fear, Patrick could just roll down the hillside and tumble to the bottom in minutes (even with his ample padding he would probably not survive the fall).

The shock of their discovery – that the mountain against which the alien facility they had named Carbonek had been built was actually a volcano – still dominated his emotions. Implications for the group camped at the foot of this most unstable of creations had to be shared with the man who had become uncrowned leader of the Remainders.

'Patrick, damn it, wait up!'

It seemed a good time to slow down; his heart was a few ticks from exploding anyway, a heart only accustomed to leisurely strolls across the golf courses of Scotland. Nothing in his life had prepared him for this experience. He eased his pace and was panting heavily when Christopher finally caught up.

The charming music producer from London was a bit of a mystery to Patrick. Tall, dark and vainly handsome, he spoke in brash tones but would often shift to more subtle and engaging words. The ladies of the group were obviously fond of those slick Italian charms/looks and the confidence ebbing from him; Patrick could understand why.

‘You’re going...to break your...neck,’ Christopher panted as he stopped.

‘We can’t linger, lad, we have to warn the others. If that volcano erupts, it might kill us all.’

‘Patrick, I don’t think we’re in immediate danger.’

‘But are we, Christopher? Do you know for certain?’

Christopher arched his back, displaying a toned abdomen that would no doubt have made many a lass swoon if all men came equipped with such a physique (maybe they did in 1989, the Scot mused). When he turned back, Patrick sensed another shift in his words.

‘Think about it a minute. What are the odds the volcano will erupt within a week of us waking up from a thousand year coma, huh? We’ve all had enough bad luck here, I don’t think anybody is that bleeding cursed. The important thing is not to panic.’

Patrick glanced back up the path where the Russian woman Tanya (who would still not reveal her last name) was bounding athletically into sight. Sara Langley would soon follow behind her. Two young, innocent women who did not need to see a silly old oaf like Patrick losing his composure.

‘You’re right. I apologise for reacting so hastily.’

A twinkle of a smile appeared then quickly disappeared from Christopher’s face. ‘I understand. I know what’s going through your mind, I do. But let’s try to stay cool for the sake of the girls, yeah?’

‘Agreed.’

The music producer tapped his shoulder reassuringly. ‘Don’t worry about the volcano, not yet. We still got a long journey back to the facility and I don’t fancy explaining why any of us had a Connery because we rushed too fast.’

Wise words, Patrick realised. Wisdom had abandoned the Scot when they reached the end of the winding path up the side of what they had believed was an ordinary mountain. Christopher had remained on the fringe of early decision-making amongst the group but his composure and common sense seemed to be shining through at just the right time.

Patrick felt angry with himself for his rash response but he had to shield it as Tanya arrived at their side.

‘Patrick,’ she brushed asides swathes of blonde hair from her face so her eyes could meet his, ‘you are all right?’

He smiled as widely as he could with his heart still racing and his stomach aching. ‘Never better, lass. Just wanted to show you kiddies I can move as fast as you.’

‘Maybe we stop for rest?’

‘Good idea,’ Christopher added, ambling to her side. ‘We don’t have to rush anything, do we?’

Patrick sensed something hidden in his tone, a subtle meaning to his words that connected at a different level with the young woman who looked away from the music producer’s deep gaze.

*Maybe it’s about me, he thought, a subtle signal to warn her not to overdo anything because the older, fatter, oafish man can’t keep up. An indiscriminate warning that the overweight Scot nearly had a heart attack and everyone should tread carefully out of pity.*

‘I will make food ready,’ the Russian replied blandly, turning away.

When she moved aside, Patrick realised he was staring up at the summit of the volcano again. They had made considerable strides down the winding path that had taken them to its peak but just knowing what was there forced the Scot to turn away.

Gareth had to know quickly. The knowledgeable teacher had proven his ability to scope out such impossible situations and find an appropriate, sensible resolution. He had demonstrated wisdom beyond his years to keep this group together against such incredible odds, alone on a distant world.

He would know the right thing to do.

‘I’ll give you a hand,’ Christopher followed Tanya as she knelt at the side of the path and began unpacking the medical satchel they had stocked with fruit. ‘If we make it a quick lunch, we might get back to the jungle before sunset.’

‘I can manage,’ Tanya replied abruptly, not meeting his eyes.

‘Let me help.’

All three looked up the path at Sara Langley. The American teenager looked like she had not even broken a sweat on the sprint down the volcano. Her pink bunny t-shirt was tied in a knot, revealing a piercing in her belly-button that confounded the Scot (who had been taken from a

more reserved 1924 when women rarely even displayed their ankles). There was a glow to the pretty blonde, her smile shinning brighter than the two suns above.

Patrick felt sorry that someone so young and innocent was caught up in this nightmare.

Christopher followed her arrival with a smile. 'A few pieces of those banana-like fruits and we can carry on. We can use most of the water too, we should be back at Carbonek soon.'

'If the weather holds,' Sara sighed, her gaze following the black blanket of clouds.

Those clouds were ominous. Patrick could not remember it raining once in the days since their awakening. The tropical nature of this jungle environment suggested that the weather could be harsh if a storm developed.

A chapter of his old life stuttered across his mind; a rare time in his youth when he had sought out knowledge and embraced education. He had sought out as many works of literature as he could acquire and managed to purchase a copy of Shakespeare's play 'The Tempest'. The tale of a storm which stranded a wise old man on an exotic, unexplored island where he had to survive against the elements.

Patrick had grown weary of the strains of study – his mind never settled on a fact long enough to absorb it – but that one play always stuck in his mind. The majesty of Shakespearean words had resonated in him, cracking open his imagination just enough to feel something.

As he ambled through that memory, his hand absently strayed down to his pocket; when he felt nothing inside, he snapped out of the reverie. 'Dear Lord.'

'What is it, Pat?' Christopher asked, concern barely registering in his smooth Cockney voice.

'The gun, Michael's revolver...it's gone. I had it when we were standing on the edge of that volcano, now it's gone. Have any of you seen it?'

'No,' Sara answered.

'No,' Tanya answered.

'No,' Christopher answered.

Patrick looked from his three companions back towards the summit of the volcano; it was eerily quiet, expectation heavy on the breeze. 'We don't have time or energy to trek back up the path to find it. If it dropped

out of my pocket as I ran, it could be anywhere. We'll just have to search for it when we bring Gareth back.'

The jolly Scot wiped a ribbon of sweat from his face, unaware one of his three companions had just lied to him.





## four

‘Try it now.’

Anna Forbes sighed again. ‘If it didn’t work two minutes ago or two minutes before that, it ain’t going to work now, is it?’

There was something sharp in her voice. Something that reflected in Denise Newman’s eyes. Anna hoped the subtly gorgeous Londoner would appreciate it was just the bitter aftertaste of fear and frustration, not directed at her personally.

She sat down in the centre of the compact nook Gareth had labelled the storage room. It was an appropriate description because of the variety of items discovered inside just over a day ago. Three wide shelves circled the circular egg-shaped room, stacked with artefacts of both human and alien origin.

Not the best place in any world to get stuck.

Within seconds of a potentially explosive discovery (jars containing spliced portions of human brains), the magical doorway to the storage room had closed shut. That was when she made another discovery; some of these magical doors that seemed to appear out of thin air could not be opened from inside.

They had made that particular discovery five hours ago.

‘I’m starting to get hungry,’ Denise muttered softly. ‘Don’t suppose as well as suitcases and guitars and bits of brains, these aliens stole any sandwiches?’

Anna laughed awkwardly. Circumstances between them had grown increasingly awkward since they stepped inside this room. And it had all started so well; they had chatted, laughed and even made a game out of their mission to investigate all the items Gareth had catalogued in this room.

Then the situation had changed.

It had not changed when Denise almost started crying at the innocuous compliment Anna had given her, a compliment that stirred up memories of her abuse at the dirty hands of her boss. It had not changed when Denise had suggested she was happier staying on this alien planet than returning home to her misery as a reluctant mistress. It had not even changed when they discovered the brains in jars.

It changed when Denise suggested she may be interested in finding love with another woman.

*Of course, she didn't suggest that, did she? Anna's mind was still racing on that subject. No, she did not, in fact she said that her boss and his sick, perverted harassment might – might, mind you – have put her off men for ever and of course that doesn't mean that she would ever consider "becoming" a lesbian and, before you get carried away, it doesn't mean in any way that she would ever consider being with you, Anna Forbes. Does it?*

Brooklyn's most under-rated artist felt her gaze drifting again.

'Don't worry,' Denise spoke up suddenly, 'we'll get out of here soon, I'm sure.'

Anna's responding smile did not feel right. Denise's comforting words were sweet and innocent but were spoken out of concern that Anna did not feel she deserved.

As far as she could remember, she had never been clear with Denise about her sexuality. That was not like her; the Anna Forbes of New York was proud and open about herself with everyone. The Anna Forbes of Parts Unknown had grown secretive by her own flamboyant standards, hiding her true self from the other abductees.

*Everyone has withdrawn. There are only twenty-four people left in the world and half of them walked off into the jungle three days ago; we all have to be careful about alienating each other. Pardon the pun.*

'Shall we do something to pass the time?' Denise suggested, a stiff awkwardness replacing her concern.

'Like what?'

'Still got your deck of cards?'

Anna fidgeted uncomfortably. Her treasured pack of Tarot cards used to be her prized possession, especially when she needed something to pass the time. Since the strange incident when she mysteriously played the same card for all eleven of the Explorers, she had been unable to even look at them.

‘Left them at Base Camp. We never finished checking this stuff, did we?’

Denise screwed up her nose in that cute way that expressed distaste. ‘I don’t much fancy picking through brains in jars.’

‘What about Gareth’s list? Is there anything on there that might be useful?’

The English Rose picked up the scrap of paper on which Gareth had hastily documented each item the previous day. He explained to Anna that his priority had been to list the stock before anything went missing. Few of the Remainders even knew the storage room existed. Anna’s mission was to check each item on the list to identify anything useful.

Gareth had explained to her alone the real purpose of that mission.

‘We need to make sure nothing gets out that shouldn’t,’ he had told her just hours earlier, ‘cause there may be something dangerous or hazardous amongst that list, something I missed. Before I tell the rest of the group about this room, I need you to sort out what we can give out from what we shouldn’t.’

*Such as brains in jars*, she thought.

‘There’s lots of human stuff on this list,’ the English Rose pointed out. ‘The guitar, suitcase, hats, a briefcase...’

‘No lightsabres, huh?’

‘Not on the list.’

‘Gareth thought that when the aliens took us, they scooped up whatever we were holding or wearing. They must’ve removed loose items and stored them here while they...’

She trailed off, not wanting to utter the word ‘experimented’ aloud. But that was exactly what the brains in the jars signified; concrete proof that the aliens had been conducting some form of brain surgery on the abductees. What, how and why were comparatively insignificant details.

‘Hey,’ Denise interrupted her thoughts and held up the list, ‘it says there’s a pickaxe in here. Maybe we can use it to break the door or something.’

She wandered across to the shelves that dominated the room, flicking permed auburn locks from her eye line. After briefly scanning the contents, she reached into the gap between the shelves and dragged out a heavy old pick with a partly rusted head. It looked suited to Matthew Somerset’s profession.

Denise hesitated before glancing up at Anna.

‘Hey, it’s your plan.’

*Come on, let’s not turn this nasty because it’s nobody’s fault you’re both stuck in here and getting uptight isn’t going to make things any better...*

She lost her voice as the English Rose struggled over to the spot in the wall where the archway used to be. With a deep breath and a tight grip, she raised the pick up over her head, shifted her stance and smashed it into the wall.

It rebounded with a shudder that reverberated down Denise’s arm and echoed with the dull tone of a tuning fork. She huffed and dropped the tool to the dirt. Once feeling returned to her arms, she glanced back at Anna who was struggling to keep the ‘told you so’ expression off her face.

‘Do we have a Plan B?’

Sighing, Anna dragged herself to her feet and began searching through the contents of the shelves. There was a variety of items that the scrawled list could not do any justice. She felt like a kid scanning the assortment of goodies in a sweet shop, uncertain of what delicacy she wanted.

Her mind wandered...

‘Here,’ she said and stepped to her left, reaching for a small bundle wrapped by a leather strap.

Breath held, she untied the strap and unwound the bundle. As Denise arrived at her side, it unravelled in Anna’s hand to reveal a large pouch with an ivory handle sticking out of it. She felt a tinge in her temples as she drew out a hunting knife and held it to the dim light bleeding through the translucent skin of the ceiling. It was an impressive collectable; the blade was about nine inches long with a sharp edge. It glistened in the light, silver shimmering with a deadly glint.

‘How did you know about that?’

She glanced at Denise before shrugging her shoulders. ‘How did you control that crazy computer with your mind?’

A sweet smile replied. ‘*Touché*, Anna.’

Unwilling to get lost in that smile again, she turned towards the door, twirled the knife in her hand and stabbed it towards the leather wall where the doorway used to be. If she had to cut their way out of the room, that would be their path.

The knife bounced off the wall and flew out of her hand. Denise shrieked as it spun in the air and dropped blade-down into the grey dirt just an inch from Anna's feet.

*Wow! I mean, that was a pretty sharp blade that just bounced off the leather walls like it was made from Kryptonite or something, it kind of makes me think that these aren't just your typical leather walls what with the lights burning inside them and now they're seemingly impervious to the tip of a blade, Jesus what is this place...*

Suddenly Anna froze. A thought exploded on her with such potency, it physically rocked her so that Denise stepped forward with a frown. All tension between them evaporated in the power of this one thought.

‘What is it, Anna?’

‘I just realised Gareth's the only one who knows we're in here. If something happens to him, we could be locked in here for a really long time.’



## five

As Gareth fixed Michael's gaze, a memory returned from his first waking day in the facility, the initial moments of this nightmare. Given the circumstances, it was right for that particular memory to feel dry in his throat.

'On three...one, two, three!'

They heaved together as the two men lifted the makeshift stretcher, a crude device supporting the still unconscious coalminer. Matthew's bulky frame had been awkward to move safely (after closer inspection, Michael determined the left shinbone was possibly broken). After shuffling him onto the stretcher, lifting it was proving a greater challenge.

Gareth had drawn on all the craft skills he could muster to create a stretcher using the metal pikes he discovered near the alien's body but he had struggled binding them together. After ripping his dirty blue shirt into shards, he left Michael to fix a brace using some slender stone fragments.

Then he returned to the alien corpse.

It was shorter than he had imagined; his mind had morphed the description of the figure in Denise Newman's dream into an ogre-like monster of hideous proportions. Though its withered skeleton was hardly a true reflection of their likeness, it appeared the aliens had only been about five feet tall with wiry frames.

Otherwise, there were a number of similarities; two arms, two legs, a similar skeletal structure (despite having a large head in proportion to its body). It sat against the wall in the last position the creature had ever known, close to the last fire it had ever made.

'Put him down,' Michael wheezed before they had even reached the steep incline in the force-field.

Gareth nodded; the weight of the coalminer was too great for them to carry (neither he nor Michael were particularly blessed with strength). They staggered as they laid the stretcher down gently on the invisible floor.

‘The incline...is too...steep,’ the medic exhaled between strained breaths. ‘I was...slipping.’

Gareth glanced over his shoulder at the ridge the medic had been trying to reach by edging backwards down the curve of the force-field. The tacky touch of humid air caressed his naked torso causing bruises from his fall to contract and forcing a hiss of pain through his teeth.

‘You’re right. We can’t carry him down, we’ll drop him.’

‘Then w-w-what do we do?’

*Think, Gaz, think. That’s the only thing you’ve ever been remotely good at, after all. You might over think the occasional...well, let’s be frank, you over think everything even...*

‘Let’s slide him,’ he said suddenly, interrupting his own doubt. ‘You come here and push him down the slope, I’ll jump down and lift that end from the ridge. Then you climb down and lift your side, okay?’

Michael nodded in understanding but it was not the medic who answered.

‘Just leave me, Gar.’

The coalminer’s eyes had opened at some point in the last few minutes. Sweat and filth had combined on all of their faces but Matthew’s face was pallid against the glitter of grime in his beard.

‘How long’ve you been awake, mate?’

A coarse voice replied. ‘Long enough to know I’m in poor condition, by the Lord.’

Michael tried a smile that came out weaker than his words. ‘I think y-you broke your l-leg when you f-f-fell. It needs surgery but I haven’t...’

‘Don’t worry about your leg,’ Gareth interrupted softly, ‘we’ll have you up and about in no time, you watch. But first we need to get back to Carbonek.’

Matthew frowned slowly. ‘I thought we were in Carbonek.’

‘We fell from the bridge, remember? The engine room? We’re beside the river underneath the bridge.’

‘Michael said it was the waterfall? From outside?’

‘That’s right. We’re going back to Base Camp as soon as we can but first we’ve got to move you onto the path over there. It’s not far.’



The coalminer tried shaking his head but the movement caused the pain coursing through his body to ignite like a spark in a gas leak. 'I told you...just leave me.'

'You promised...' Gareth felt his voice cracking but he regained some speck of tenacity. 'You promised Claire you were going to teach her Quoits, remember? Do you want me to break that promise you made?'

Silence fell around the three men, only the lapping river beneath them played a sullen soundtrack in the background. Matthew swallowed hard to find enough strength for a weak nod.

'Then get moving, boys.'

\*\*\*\*\*

Gareth braced himself on the rocky surface of the ridge as Michael, pushing from his knees, slid the stretcher down the slope of the force field. He could hear Matthew grimacing with every jolt but they were making progress. The medic's young face was taught with concentration but Gareth was carrying most of the weight of his injured countryman.

'Nearly...'

The stretcher creaked as less and less was supported by the force field. His own knees buckled as he shuffled backwards. He glanced down the shadowy passage to where the alien corpse was waiting, to where he had found the graves.

Whatever manner of civilisation the creatures came from, they shared a similar respect for the dead as humans. A few paces beyond the seated skeleton, Gareth had discovered three large shapes in the shadows, mounds on the ground that could not be anything other than graves.

On each mound, Gareth discovered a thick woven cloth that had been laid with care (probably by the seated alien, who had nobody left to bury him/her/it when he/she/it died). Knowing they needed something to bind the spears into a stretcher, he had swallowed bile building at the back of throat as he removed one.

*That's desecration, you know?* crept into his mind as he reached towards the cloth. *You know absolutely nothing about this species, their culture or their rituals and in your first official engagement, you disturb the remains of their dead. Sick; that's what you are, Gaz.*

With a deep swallow, he grabbed the cloth and snatched it away before losing his nerve. A cloud of dust had pounced at him, a bitter-

tasting haze of death and disease that sent him into coughing fits. Once it dissipated, he was able to look down at the remains he had disturbed.

The remains of this creature were a little gooier than his seated friend. Black patches of a coarse skin seemed to be made of dry scales like an overcooked fish, decomposed over many years. With limited light so far down the path, the brittle skull seemed to be screaming up at him. The stench was potent and Gareth had quickly returned to the others.

‘One more,’ Michael called, waking him out of his reverie.

‘Make it quick, mate.’

His knees started to give in under the weight as he held the spear-end of the two pikes above his shoulders. Half of Matthew hung in mid air whilst the other half balanced on the slope of the invisible dome that had broken their fall.

*Imagine if it hadn't, he reminded himself. Our broken bodies would have washed down the river and vomited out of the waterfall into the chasm outside the facility. Certain death for three, please.*

Michael lifted his head. ‘On three?’

‘Just bloody do it, Michael.’

The medic nodded, disappeared from sight then the stretcher started sliding again. Closer to the edge...

‘Whoa, that’s enough,’ he yelled as he bore the majority of the weight of the coalminer and his clunky stretcher. ‘Get down here, quick.’

Michael leapt down from the force field and grabbed the other end of the stretcher just as Gareth’s legs finally reached for the white flag. The pressure was relieved and he guided the stretcher to the side of the ridge, where he and Michael lowered it gently.

‘And...down,’ he cried as they released their grips together. Michael echoed his groans as they straightened their aching backs.

‘What now, Gareth?’ the young medic asked in his meekest voice.

Sighing, Gareth glanced around. They were alive but that was where the good news ended. They were trapped at the bottom of a deep cave beside a rapid river, surrounded by shadows and unscalable walls and alien corpses with no apparent means of returning to the facility high above their heads.

‘Gareth?’

When he registered the hopelessness in the teenager’s eyes, he felt the same sensation inside him for the briefest moment. It was an overwhelming instant where he believed he would follow the same fate

as the decaying alien corpses. An eerie confidence filled his voice when he answered.

‘Next, we find a way out of this place, pick up our injured friend and get back to the others. If the power is back on, we’ve got work to do if we still want to find our way back home. Trust me, Michael.’

He watched the transformation in Michael’s face as those words echoed. His eyes grew brighter, his smile grew stronger and even a little colour returned to his cheeks. Gareth felt like he had given the last of his own hope over to the kid, keeping none for himself. The moment was interrupted by Matthew’s flummoxed question.

‘What did you lads lift me from, then?’



## SIX

Bryony stood at the top of the winding metal staircase that bore deep into the ground at the end of the northern corridor. She had changed out of her sequined dress – which she had worn since disappearing from her studio-owned mansion in 1937 – into casual jeans and a red jumper two sizes too large. A dead woman's clothes did not detract from her grace, only the stream of dried tears that stained her face.

Tears for a woman she barely knew.

Panic had filled her mind when she realised Emily Wade was dead. Her body was sprawled in the dirt behind the four alien tables and the terrified French girl sobbed softly at her side. Yet one thought above all others still resonated with the First Dame of the Silver Screen.

It could have been her.

It was still unclear what happened. Bryony had missed the incident and could not understand Juliette's frightened ramblings. Something had for some reason somehow killed the poor Texan. If Bryony had decided to push the button instead of searching the chambers, it might have killed her.

Her mind churned over the few facts she knew about Emily and how little she knew forced more tears past her defences. After six days of this nightmare, Bryony could not remember holding a genuine conversation with her.

*Too late for that now, dear...*

She blinked away that voice and a fresh tear rolled across the fading bruise on her cheek.

After maybe an hour, Bryony had grown more worried when there was no sign of the others returning. With an unconscious child, a terrified foreigner and a dead body, she needed help. She did not know where

Anna had gone and Patrick was still out in the jungle so there was only one action to take.

*And why should you take any action, her mother's voice tried again, when you can just sit in your precious Base Camp and wait? I'll tell you why, Bryony; you need him. Not just to fix your mistakes, you need that boy because you can't survive alone.*

Maybe she did; maybe Bryony needed Gareth more than any of the abductees. Maybe her upbringing at the hands of an abusive mother and her life at the fists of a violent lover had beaten the fight out of her. Maybe she needed Gareth because he was trying to save her, not to hurt her.

Lots of maybes...

Her most imminent need was for salvation so she left Juliette with half-understood instructions to watch Claire while she set off in search of help. She placed a jacket over Emily's head, quickly changed into more practical attire and left Base Camp more frightened than she had ever felt in her life.

With a tired whimper, Bryony wiped away that rogue tear and started descending the staircase.

\*\*\*\*\*

Gareth stood at the end of the stone ridge that ran alongside the river. The rock pathway stretched into the darkened distance but he had followed it in the general direction towards the waterfall outside the facility. The symphony of rushing water echoed majestically but he could no longer see the river. Shadows were so dense that he had to use his hand on the rock face to guide him.

That was when he found the tunnel.

The wall disappeared from his touch and he stumbled sideways. When he found his footing and his eyes readjusted, he could just make out a circular opening that bore deep into the wall on his left. After a few minutes inspecting it, he returned to the others.

'I found a passage,' he announced, wiping sweat from his face, 'about three hundred metres that way. Looks like the only way out.'

'Is that w-w-where those th-things came from?' Michael asked, nodding towards the remains of the creatures.

'Possibly.'

Gareth had taken the young medic to inspect the corpses and Michael avoided his example of vomiting on sight. His medical knowledge had not brought much insight regarding the creatures' anatomy or origins (though he noted its ribcage seemed to have interlacing horizontal and vertical ribs). There was nothing more they could do but leave the remains in peace.

The passage represented their only chance. Michael had not found any other escape routes and there was no chance of climbing back up to the engine room even without the coalminer strapped to a makeshift stretcher.

'So,' Matthew croaked from the floor, 'what's holding us back?'

Gareth met Michael's gaze; those young eyes shimmered with the same unease he felt. There were no guarantees about where that path led, what lay at its end or whether they could get back to Carbonek. Carrying Matthew Somerset through the darkness would not be easy either.

*Who knows what mysteries this place holds, Gaz. You've not even scratched the surface of that facility up there but this place feels so much...darker. The stench, the heat, the unending darkness. Death lives in the crevices of these caves and who knows what spirits stalk the shadows.*

'Let's get going, then.'

Michael nodded slowly before the two men lifted the stretcher and struggled down the path, deeper into the perpetual darkness.

\*\*\*\*\*

As Bryony stood at the entrance to the engine room, all thoughts of fear, despair and anxiety were replaced by a raw sensation of awe.

The vast expanse of the cavern echoed her stunned breath. Two platforms separated by a wide, seemingly-bottomless chasm, the distant platform dominated by six massive cylinders that effervesced with a red liquid bubbling behind narrow windows in each cylinder. The heat inside the engine room was unbearable but she pressed onward.

*So where's Gareth, dear? What's happened to the man you thought could save you from this nightmare, to the only hope you have of getting home? What happened to the one person you thought of before all others when you needed help? Where is he?*

Bryony frowned and whirled around. There was no other exit from the engine room. The path she had taken from Base Camp did not present

any opportunities to miss Gareth or the others. This was where he had been heading so where was he now?

To her right, she noticed a compact waterfall cascading down the rock face, streaming into a small rocky pool at the edge of the platform. But that one little feature did not seem sufficient to make the roaring noise she could hear.

Bryony's feet dragged her to the edge of the platform and the muscles in her neck arched until she was staring down into a dark abyss. Light struggled to fully illuminate the cavern below but her keen eyes made out an ebbing movement that was unmistakable.

A rapid-flowing river far, far below.

Eyes widening, she spun sharply around. In her haste, she needed a few seconds to register the broken stone remains of the bridge that had spanned the void between platforms. In those seconds, every potential scenario flashed across her mind. Three missing men, a broken bridge, a fatal plunge...

When she finally realised what the ruins suggested, she collapsed to her knees in a fit of tears.

\*\*\*\*\*

Gareth hesitated at the fork in the tunnel. Darkness was dominant throughout the roughly carved passages. He felt like Bilbo Baggins picking his way through the mountains, only without riddles in the dark. The good news was they had seemed to be sloping gently upwards but he had no idea where the path led.

The fork had appeared abruptly through the shadows. They had been moving for about an hour, stopping twice as the weight of the stretcher became too much of a strain. The floor was uneven, darkness unending and air as sour as a tomb. As he was leading, Gareth seemed to be pulling much of the coalminer's weight and his arms were practically dislocated.

'What is it, Gar?' Matthew called from behind him; there was pain in every syllable he spoke.

'Just a fork in the road, mate. No problems.'

Michael's voice made barely a whisper off the walls. 'W-w-what do we do?'

Gareth narrowed his eyes, trying to focus his vision to see deeper into the darkness. The path on the left wound up and seemed to be smoother;



the path on the right delved deeper into the ground towards a stale smell like rotting vegetables.

‘I think...’

Suddenly a hot spark of agony flickered across his head like a short-circuit. Prickly, searing pain rippled across his temples, his grip tightening around the ends of the stretcher and he sucked in a sudden breath with a sharp inhale.

As the spark flashed across his mind, images followed in vicious bursts.

An image of blood dripping into Michael Leigh’s open, unflinching mouth. An image of the young medic’s body impaled on a bed of steel spears sticking out of the ground, deadly weapons similar to the ones forming the frame of the stretcher. An image of a winding passage followed by an image of a smooth tunnel winding upwards.

Gareth’s eyes snapped open and the pain, the images, even the shock was gone.

‘Gareth...what’s w-w-wrong?’

He turned slowly to fix Michael’s eyes. They were pale in the darkness but Gareth could still see them.

*What the Hell was that, Gaz?*

‘This way,’ he muttered softly before turning down the foul-smelling path to his right.



## seven

How long had it been? An hour? Maybe two?

When Bryony finally stopped crying, her thoughts entered a momentary blindness as though her mind had switched itself off. She sat in silence under the glow of the engine room before staggering back towards the spiralling staircase. Weary from despair, she had even ascended it before her thoughts reignited again.

*What now, dear? What's to be done without that man? The teacher was your best chance to get home, to find your way out of this forsaken nightmare, but what can you realistically do without him?*

Another tear abseiled down her cheek but she was too tired to sob. Or fight back.

*He's gone, dear; fell into that river, by looks of it. There was only a shred of hope before but now there's nothing. No hope, no optimism, you only have despair and death to look forward to now. I know you've never taken your mother's advice before but this would be the time to start. Just give up and save yourself the hassle of fighting.*

It was true that she had never taken her mother's advice. They had lived in a small town called Independence, north of Los Angeles in the Owens Valley. It was a poor life at a time when poverty still raged through the lower classes of America like wildfire. Her mother scraped together a living, not enough to survive but somehow they managed.

And her mother never allowed her to forget it.

'You're an ungrateful child, Bry,' her mother used to scold her. 'I work hard to put food on the table while you do nothing but waste what I earn. You want to get out on that street and start earning your own way in life, you do.'

So she had. Aged sixteen, Bryony abandoned her mother and ran away to the city where she had worked her way up to become the First Dame of the Silver Screen.

*No chance of that here, her mother's voice reasserted itself. No running away this time, dear. You have a choice before you; either give up and die or fight a hopeless battle then die.*

Her feet had been dragging her back down the northern corridor towards Base Camp but she stopped suddenly in mid-step.

*That's not the choice, she suddenly found her own voice, the choice is either give up or carry out the promise Gareth made to everyone. He promised to find a way home and that's what I have to do now. I've got to take his place and finish what he started.*

Her mother's voice laughed inside her head.

'Don't be so childish, dear.'

That voice was not inside her head.

Bryony swung around and stared aghast. Standing in the centre of the corridor, beneath the daylight bleeding through the transparent walls, was her mother.

Mary-Anne James was a plain woman; a gaunt frame and mousey hair tinged with grey dangling over heavy eyes a subtle shade of sapphire, a pale imitation of her daughter's. Her cloth skirt was dirty and the sleeves of her cotton blouse were rolled up to her elbows, ready for toil. She focused Bryony with a glare as impatient as her words.

'M-Mom?' Bryony stammered, shock draining her of colour and strength.

'You've always been the same,' her mother spoke as though she were actually there, 'living in a dream, turning your back to the reality of how harsh life is. You think you can even survive on your own?'

Bryony's mouth gaped wordlessly as her mother stepped towards her, tattered shoes imprinting on the grey dirt on the floor.

'Face facts, Bry, you've got no chance of surviving this world, never mind fulfilling the promise of a dead man. Perhaps that boy Gareth could find the way home; maybe you believed that but you just can't do it by yourself. You're too...useless.'

The shock gripped Bryony like a fist, closing on her so tightly that her breath caught in her chest. Her mother could not be here, she just could not.

'Mom...'

‘Don’t you answer back to your mother,’ Mary-Anne snarled and sprang at her daughter, hand raised.

Bryony flinched, raising her hand in defence as she had countless times as a girl. The snarl echoed around the corridor as she closed her eyes in readiness for another beating she did not deserve.

Nothing happened.

When she opened her eyes again, she was alone. There was no sign of her mother. Silence filled the empty corridor.

Everything suddenly collapsed around Bryony, a cave-in of her emotional state. The foundations of her composure disintegrated and the bitterest emotions encompassed her in a claustrophobic cocoon of panic. Head spinning, she ran wildly down the corridor.

Her mind could not find a voice but it replayed for her every nightmare, every moment of fear she had lived through in her callous upbringing. It was no wonder she was hallucinating; even in a forsaken jungle on an alien world, her mother’s ghost would not leave her alone.

Bryony’s strength began to fail just as she reached the junction of the four corridors inside the facility, the grand courtyard dominated by a majestic old fountain. Her legs buckled and she collapsed to her knees in front of its stone border. Both lungs burned as that fear ignited inside her, a raging flame fed by the combination of hysteria and grief.

‘It’s not fair,’ Bryony sighed through the pain, ‘he can’t be gone.’

The evidence was straight forward; there had once been a bridge connecting those two platforms. She had seen it in the image Denise unearthed from the strange computer. There was no other sign of the three men who went to fix whatever had gone wrong down there. The river would have swept away anything killed by the fall.

Nothing could survive that fall.

She glanced upwards at the sunlight streaming down through the clear dome at the top of the curved ceiling. The beautiful glass bubble refracted the light falling onto her like a beacon.

*Then we have to find the way home without them. We’ll mourn them as a group just as we’ll mourn Emily but then the group must pull together. Someone will have to help them all get home...*

‘For Gareth,’ she whispered breathlessly.

Another sound overlapped her words. A low sound, barely audible. This time, it was not the stern words of her mother. Nor was it the sound of her fellow abductees – any of them – returning to help her. It was a sound that froze her blood and stopped her heart.

A heavy, salivating growl.

Bryony pulled her gaze down slowly to behold what was standing in the frame of the southern corridor entrance, barely a dozen metres away eclipsing the distant sunlight.

A large boar-like creature glared right back at her. It was hairy with silver fangs overhanging its massive jaw-like stalactites, saliva dripping into the dirt. Its eyes were hidden by a matted fringe but she sensed the beast glaring back. It snorted gruffly and stamped a heavy hoof into the ground.

Bryony and the beast stared at each other across the silent courtyard for an unending moment.

When her paralysis broke, Bryony leapt up from her knees and began running towards Base Camp. Her feet slipped on the loose soil before she found her pace and darted into the western corridor. The beast set off in pursuit with a deep, echoing howl.

The corridor snaked left then right as Bryony pushed every ounce of energy into her legs. She dared not look back, limbs still screaming in weary pain. The hooves of the creature thudded in the dirt as it chased, four legs sounding faster than two. A thought about her decision to change from her evening gown into the scavenged jeans flashed across her mind. She pushed it aside as she sensed the beast closing.

Then she glanced back.

The creature was just a few paces behind and as she turned, it leapt through the air. Had she glanced back a second later, she would have been dead.

With a scream, Bryony changed her direction at the last instant, spinning sideways and lurching forward as the beast glided towards her. It missed by barely an inch and smacked against the curving leather wall with a grunt. She had barely an instant to adjust her momentum and push forward before it was up again, back in pursuit.

Base Camp was just ahead.

Grimacing through the pain, she pushed herself harder and sprinted towards the open doorway. The beast was gaining again, closing fast; she only had one chance.

This time, it was her turn to jump through the air.

Bryony felt the creature's snarling breath as she flew across the corridor, beneath the archway and inside the laboratory. As gravity pulled her down, she twisted her body in mid-air and reached out to hit

the side of the archway. Her hand connected with the frame of the arch just before she landed with a thud.

The mysterious door materialised from nothing and barely a second later, a heavy thud smacked against it.

Bryony waited with a suspended breath for the archway to open and the beast to finish her off. She stared at the doorway, unaware of Juliette glancing up from behind the chambers. When there was no sign of the beast getting inside, she collapsed with a relieved sigh tinged with terror.





## eight

Shadows and time blended together in the murky catacombs that stretched somewhere far beneath Carbonek. Visibility was elusive, unseen heat creating an oven effect in the winding, claustrophobic passages. With his hands numb under the weight of the stretcher, Gareth needed to rely on his fluctuating eyesight to navigate the unending darkness.

After the fork in the path where he had witnessed the unnerving vision of Michael's dead body, they had followed the descending tunnel until the rotten stench became unbearable. Patches of moss grew along the walls and they occasionally stepped in shallow puddles of foul black water. Every step was a risk he had no choice in taking.

*Focus, Gaz. Those aliens must have found a way into these caves; at the least, someone had to forge these tunnels in the first place. It's either keep going or die in the darkness.*

His active imagination was playing cruel games. His mind outlined pictures of flooded passages, cave-ins, even an army of alien soldiers (the living variety) around the next corner waiting to kill them. At one point, he even thought the walls were glowing a subtle shade of brilliant red. He bit his lip and the fresh pain brought him back into focus.

'How m-m-much further?'

Gareth sighed as he pushed himself up the treacherous slope. 'A little less than the last time you asked, Michael. Just focus on what you're doing, not how long it takes.'

He could not see the medic's head drop but he knew it had. The kid was struggling; the toil, the fear, the uncertainty of this perilous journey. Michael had witnessed the most atrocious conflict mankind had ever inflicted on itself and he knew more about fear than a primary school teacher ever could but he was only nineteen. A boy trudging through a nightmare beyond his comprehension.

‘How’re you coping?’ he asked, more kindness in his voice this time.

‘I can barely see where I’m g-going,’ the answer floated through the darkness.

‘Just follow my lead and watch your feet.’

‘My hands are aching too.’

Matthew suddenly piped up from his position on the stretcher. ‘You know, lads, it would be a far easier journey if you left me here.’

Gareth stopped cold and fell silent for a minute. As the others waited for his response, he could feel their fears emanating behind him like a vapour, filling the tunnel invisibly, choking them all. He sensed his friends wondering whether he was considering Matthew’s suggestion.

‘Put it down,’ he whispered softly.

Michael could not refrain from sighing in relief as they placed the makeshift stretcher on the uneven floor. It creaked as they lowered it, the straps straining under the coalminer’s hefty frame. Michael collapsed onto the hard ground and leant against the wall. Matthew grimaced as his injured leg settled into the most comfortable position possible.

Gareth remained standing, his back to the others.

*What can you tell them, Gaz? How can you help them through this? That’s what you’re thinking, right?*

*Maybe...*

*What happened to the drunken wreck locked away from the world? What happened to the man who ruined the one pure thing in his life, the love of a beautiful woman? What happened to that irresponsible, washed-up loser who destroyed everything of value in his life?*

*I’ve changed.*

Yes, he had changed since his abduction.

For the first time in what felt like years, he thought about the kiss that almost was with Bryony James. That moment in the cupboard when her belief in him had drawn them closer, their eyes met and their lips suddenly dried up in anticipation. If they had not been interrupted, he might have kissed the woman who had been a harmless fantasy in his childhood.

That image was worth fighting for.

‘Let’s get one thing straight, guys. Nobody’s being left behind, none of us. This path has an end and we’re going to find it. Understood?’

He turned to the two men behind him. They stared at him for a long time until Matthew spoke, gritting his teeth against the pain in his leg.

‘Gar, we’re not giving up. *Ddisgwyl at ‘r ddyfodol*; it means “look to the future”. I’m still looking forward to seeing my wife again, I do not intend to let her down.’

‘Good. Me neither.’

Michael opened his mouth, hesitated then closed it.

‘What is it, Michael?’

Michael opened his mouth again before closing it again.

‘Michael?’

The young medic glanced around, unable to fix his gaze until Gareth stepped into his line of sight. When he looked up, doubt framed his pale features.

‘Why didn’t you go up the other path, Gareth? The one on the left?’

It was Gareth’s turn to look away, unable to catch Michael’s eye.

‘What path?’ Matthew asked.

When Gareth did not answer, Michael responded awkwardly. ‘W-when w-we stopped earlier, there was this f-f-fork in the road. We went down, not up. Why?’

Gareth took a few steps away. He resisted the temptation to brush his fingers through his greasy hair, an old habit from a difficult period of his life. ‘I had a hunch.’

‘Perhaps we should go back,’ Michael suggested, standing up gingerly. ‘The other path might lead up to the surface.’

‘It won’t.’ He had said the words before he could stop himself.

*How are you going to explain this, Gaz? Oh, by the way, I had something that resembled a vision that suggested you were going to die if we went left instead of right...who would buy that?*

What other explanation could there be? That image was undeniable, the meaning incontrovertible. What had plagued his mind throughout this journey were the practicalities; he had never experienced anything like it in his life.

A premonition.

He knew enough about quantum mechanics to understand that predicting the future was impossible. His mind returned to the incident with Denise Newman the previous night and her dream of the creature who had warned her about the engine room. A visionary nightmare? It made no sense but he had not ignored its meaning.

Had he just done the same thing for a flash of prophetic images?

*Then how do you persuade these guys to follow your lead? What elaborate set of deceptions can you concoct that would convince two men – who you’ve never met before this nightmare began – to follow you blindly into the darkness? What lies will make them trust you?*

He released a long, drawn out sigh before turning back to Michael. ‘When I stopped at that fork in the road, I saw something. A flash of images in my head like a series of photographs. They...convinced me to turn right instead of left.’

Matthew tried sitting up in his stretcher in order to look at him. ‘What did you see?’

Gareth’s gaze dominated Michael’s. The medic seemed to be looking deeper into his eyes, probing the man rather than the statement. The stare held for a long time.

*You should’ve gone with the lies, Gaz. See what you’ve done? You put this kid on the spot where he has to figure out if he can trust your fabulous tales. You placed your faith in a vision, now he has to place his faith in you.*

‘Michael?’

The medic nodded slowly, unconvincingly. ‘Let’s keep going, then.’

Gareth’s relieved smile seemed to fill the tunnel. It was a leap of faith from a young man who had no reason to believe in anything. Somehow, since this nightmare had begun, Michael had grown on him like a younger brother and he did not want to lie to him. He wanted to give the kid a reason to believe that salvation was a possibility.

Because if one of the abductees could believe, it would only be a matter of time before they all did.

He patted the medic on the shoulder and even offered a cheeky wink that was lost in the shadows. The moment lingered until they picked up the stretcher and continued along the path.

## nine

Christopher inhaled deeply as a heavy jungle breath caressed his naked torso. The mysterious suns – one smaller and brighter than the other – still heated the world even as day drifted towards night and a storm drifted towards his weary party. A blanket of grumbling clouds overhead threatened the first fall of rain as the last glint of sunlight broke over the western sky.

The end of the path was in sight just beneath them; a few more twists down the slope and the path would return them to the base of the volcano. Another hour or two stumbling through the darkness and they would be back at Carbonek, telling the rest of the Remainders about their discovery.

*That's when The Scourge of London shows his guile. It's not enough to be the bearer of bad news, though. The rest of this mixed bag of fools and losers need to recognise my rule is their best hope of survival. So how am I going to turn them against their saviour?*

That puzzle had perplexed him for days. How could he convince a group of eleven people who had placed their faith in Gareth Oakley to turn away from that faith? He needed to persuade this eclectic band of strangers to follow him down a path none of them wanted to travel.

Making a new life on this planet.

*Can't blame them. Facing the rest of their lives stranded on an abandoned alien world with nothing to live for but the challenge of survival. Scraping together the necessities of life to avoid starvation, disease or the insanity that comes with such despair. No wonder they blindly follow the teacher.*

Christopher had not yet figured out why Gareth annoyed him so much. His floppy fringe, his puppy-dog eyes, his know-it-all attitude. Maybe it was that monotone accent. Maybe it was the way the others looked to him like lost children seeking guidance.

If they relented to his will, Christopher could save them all and set-up a new human colony on this tropical world.

‘You all right, laddie?’

He smiled down to Patrick at his side. ‘Dandy, Patrick. How’re you holding up?’

‘Well enough,’ the Scot laughed softly, ‘though I wouldn’t mind seeing a shot of whisky and a warmed bed at the end of this path.’

‘Throw in a bottle of beer with a packet of fags and I might even join you.’

Patrick laughed harder, even slapping Christopher on the back.

If the fat fool succumbed to his charms, maybe there was hope. Patrick was a jolly tub of lard but even Christopher appreciated his decent, honest persona; it made him extremely gullible. It might require an all-out charm offensive to manipulate the whole group and expose the weaknesses of each individual but he could do it.

He had done it before.

‘How are the ladies holding up?’

Christopher glanced over his shoulder; Sara and Tanya were keeping their distance from each other as they turned the penultimate corner of the winding path.

*Take these two lovelies; one is nothing more than a girl, the other’s an enigma. Both glorious in their own ways but also flawed in their own ways. Different bait will hook each fish.*

Tanya was unstable; that night she had kissed him passionately beside the fireplace and dragged him down the path to do the dirty to him had been a sign of her weakness. An inability to control the emotions bubbling beneath that cold Russian exterior. Whatever had made her explode like that, it was just one button of many he could learn to push.

Sara was easier to read; the Yank teenager with the two-tone highlights had developed a crush on him and that gave him a subtle yet poignant power over her. As long as he nurtured that crush and developed it at an appropriate pace, he could benefit from her unwavering support and blind loyalty.

As well as her more carnal benefits.

‘I think they’ll be as glad as any of us to get back to Base Camp,’ he answered. ‘Never thought I’d look forward to sleeping on one of those bleeding chamber beds.’

‘Not that any of us will get much sleep tonight, I’ll wager,’ Patrick lowered his voice. ‘What will we do about this volcano, Chris?’

Christopher pretended to glance around cautiously but he knew the women were out of earshot. ‘Let’s wait until we get back to the others. It might take a certain approach to avoid a panic or something. We’ll judge the mood before breaking the news, yeah?’

Patrick hesitated momentarily, skipping his stride slightly.

*He’s thinking about it, Christopher thought. He’s been Gareth’s most dedicated follower since the awakening and he’ll follow the teacher blindly. An old man too trusting to bother thinking for himself. Blind, pathetic fool.*

‘Whatever you think.’

‘It makes sense, Patrick. We rush in screaming that a volcano is about to erupt above our heads and everyone will lose their heads. Let’s keep the newsflash under our hats until we’re sure the group are ready to hear it.’

Patrick nodded to the logic before pulling ahead; he wanted to be the first to reach the ground.

*As long as he’s not the first to tell the group. I’m in control. If I can get to the others before Gareth, even better. The seeds of doubt must be planted by the right person, someone willing to take advantage of the situation that arises from it. Subtlety over sincerity.*

Another rumble of thunder roared overhead before the first drops of rain began to fall. As comforting as the sensation was on his naked skin, Christopher could sense a storm coming.

They finally reached the end of the path and as he set foot on level ground, he glanced back towards the top of the volcano. They had made much better time descending it, thanks partly to Patrick’s panicked sprint from the brim. With the suns already setting, the last leg of their journey would be a tired trapeze through the darkened jungle back to Base Camp.

That would be when Christopher announced to the group they were camped at the foot of a volcano that could erupt any moment. He would explain that Gareth had convinced them all to stay behind and introduce the suggestion that only *his* leadership could guarantee their safety.

He tried to hide his self-satisfied smirk as the others reached the bottom of the trail. The smirk transformed effortlessly into a charming smile. ‘Nearly home, ladies.’

Tanya glanced up frostily before brushing past him. The icy exterior of the Russian minx was probably for the benefit of the group. She was

not going to admit to their one-night stand and that suited him for the moment. He was under her skin and there would be plenty of time to burrow deeper.

Sara stepped up to him as the rain began falling harder and her eyes drifted down to his toned abdomen; the Princess looked ready to ravage him but there would be plenty of time for that too.

‘Are we nearly back at Camp?’ she asked.

‘Another hour, maybe two. Carbonek awaits, huh?’

‘What are we going to tell the others?’

‘Leave that with me, Princess,’ he whispered. ‘I’ll take care of it. When we get back to Base Camp, just make sure Patrick gets some rest or a fresh drink of water. Look after him, he’s struggled with the heat.’

The teenager nodded eagerly, a glint in her eyes probably just more evidence that she enjoyed making him happy than that she understood what he was planning. He noticed how the first film of rainwater made her skin glow and her pink top stick to her taut waist.

*This girl is fit, I’ll give her that. And that accent! Back in London, I might have singled her out from the crowd to be my latest conquest. Another notch on the belt, another prized score, another...*

His train of thought collapsed as she smiled at him.

There was something deeper in that smile, something that shone brighter than the final glint of the second sun reflected off the falling rain. If he was any judge of women, he guessed that Sara Langley was falling in love with him.

‘Sara, I...’

‘Chris!’

He snapped out of his reverie at the panic in Patrick’s voice. When he looked up, Christopher noticed both the Scot and the Russian were motionlessly staring beyond the jungle, across the open field. Framed by the last shade of dusk, a snarling beast bore down on them through the long grass with evil intent in its growl.



## ten

Bryony felt fear in the pit of her stomach as the beast rammed itself against the Base Camp door for the fifth time and fought against it. Fear was no longer an option. Gareth was dead, Anna was missing while Patrick's group could be gone for days. It was unfair to expect a French peasant from 1591 to comprehend what was happening.

She was alone.

'You've been alone since you left me, you know.'

Bryony jumped at the sound of her mother's voice as clear and real as though she was standing against the curved wall behind her.

Which she was.

'I was the only family you had,' Mary-Anne continued coldly, 'and you ran away from me. You abandoned our family to be alone, live alone and die alone.'

Desperate to avoid the prospect that she was insane, Bryony focused her gaze on the young farm girl.

Juliette was huddled in hiding from her raw fear, head buried in the skinny arms wrapped around her legs. Bryony had sympathy for her; she had been snatched from her life at such a young age. But her life was a simple, uncomplicated existence. Poverty, hunger and disease were her only real challenges.

Suddenly something struck Bryony with such force that she sat forward, Claire's head bobbling in her lap. Her mother noticed too, passing Juliette and kneeling in front of her daughter.

'I know that look, Bry. You used to get it when you were a girl, listening to fairytales at bedtime. That glazed look when your imagination finds a picture you like and blows it up to something that captures your attention.'

'Go away,' escaped Bryony's taut lips.

‘Only this time, the fairytale has you playing the role of the heroine, a brave warrior princess standing up for these forlorn souls who’ve lost their leader. You’re going to step forward and risk your life to save them, aren’t you?’

She wanted to yell at this apparition, this hallucination, this...whatever it was playing games with her mind. It could not be her mother, it had to be a deception. Nothing but an empty trick.

Bryony turned her gaze slowly back to fix her mother’s eyes resolutely.

‘Don’t you look at me like that,’ her mother yelled at her, spittle sticking in the corner of her mouth. ‘I’m your mother and you’re nothing. You’re not good enough for anything so what do you think you can do about this?’

Mary-Anne’s voice ascended to the brink of screaming as she met her daughter’s glare with fury, their noses almost touching. Bryony’s eyes drilled into her mother’s as the scream faded.

‘I’m going to finish this,’ she said aloud. It was not exactly a response because her mother was not actually there and Juliette could not understand even though she glanced up with wide, teary eyes.

Bryony said it for herself.

Placing Claire’s head gently on the ground, Bryony stood up and strode across to the pile of clothes they had gathered from the bodies around the facility. Juliette watched wordlessly as she picked something up, crossed the room and opened the door.

The archway reappeared to reveal the beast pacing beyond the arch. A ribbon of saliva dripped onto the dirt and its growl echoed down the corridor as it stared up at the woman standing before it. There was a second of hesitation before the beast pounced with a victorious snarl, fangs flying towards her throat.

Bryony stood her ground and raised the double-barrelled handgun she had discovered in the bundle of clothes. Though she could not see the creature’s eyes, she guessed realisation flashed across its mind in the instant she pulled the trigger.

Blue flames erupted from both barrels, followed hastily by a sonic boom that filled the entire facility. Something connected with the beast’s chest in mid-air, exploding its soft gut. It flew backwards with such velocity, the lifeless body smacked against the wall then hit the floor in a smouldering crimson lump.

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Rainwater fell into Patrick's gaping mouth as the beast glared menacingly at him across the open field. He had never felt so terrified in his life. The creature JC Jackson warned them about had made an unexpected appearance in the final light of day.

It looked like a large boar, stunted in stature but it carried that physique menacingly. Wide shoulders, powerful legs, silver fangs, matted fur damp with the rain that began to beat down mercilessly. As it began encroaching on their position, its expectant growl could be heard above the thunder.

*This is how I'm going to die, he thought. Ravaged to death by a wild, silver-fanged beast deep in a desolate jungle on a forsaken alien world with two suns. If I'm honest, I didn't see it coming.*

Lightning flashed over the jungle, illuminating the creature. An unkempt fringe covered its eyes. That unnerved Patrick, being unable to look into the eyes of the thing intent on ending his life.

*My luck's run out,* he mused as he swallowed hard in expectation of the onslaught.

As the thunder rumbled again, the creature suddenly stopped in its tracks and turned its gaze westward, into the jungle. As Patrick watched, the creature threw back its head and howled savagely, a carnal cry of rage directed towards the distant facility. Whatever had grabbed its attention gave it enough grief to...

'Run,' Patrick hissed through the rain, 'now!'

His words hit Christopher, Tanya and Sara like a harsh slap in the face and they turned together, sprinting away from the creature. Nobody dared glance back as they crossed the open plains towards the jungle.

The only clue they had that the creature was following came from the sounds of it slashing through the undergrowth.

The abductees plunged into the heart of the jungle, darting between trees and plants to the rhythm of their beating hearts. Branches were cut aside as they sprinted past knotted tree roots and overgrown weeds. Blurs of green and brown flew past, their tired legs ached and rain breached overhanging branches, obscuring their vision as they fled.

Just as a large crack of lightning exploded above him, Patrick heard a scream before the rumbling thunder. He glanced back at Sara Langley sprawled on the jungle floor, foot caught in a divot.

Patrick slowed to turn; she had meandered wide to the left a dozen metres away, weeping in the mud. He meant to go back for her but a strong hand gripped his arm.

‘No,’ Tanya yelled, ‘keep going.’

Shock stopped his voice but before he could protest, the foliage behind Sara rustled with the force of the creature chasing them. It clipped a tree trunk and for an instant, Patrick thought its body seemed to disappear into thin air. Tanya pulled him harder, spinning him around and propelling him deeper into the undergrowth before he could watch the beast bearing down on the poor girl.

*Can’t leave her*, his mind raced to keep up with his heart. *That’s not who I am, I can’t leave the fallen, I can’t leave her behind. That’s not who I am.*

But his legs and Tanya’s grip ignored his principles.

They pushed on, breaking through an overhanging umbrella of large plants and nearly colliding with Christopher, who had halted at the edge of the cliff that dropped hundreds of metres into the chasm surrounding the facility.

‘What do we do?’ Tanya cried.

The music producer turned. ‘Where the Hell’s Sara?’

‘I...’ Patrick started before a rustle of leaves interrupted him.

The creature stepped purposefully through the undergrowth, hefty hooves pounding into the mud as another rumble of thunder filled the world. Darkness was falling ferociously onto the three trapped humans and the single salivating beast that had them cornered.

The pursuit was over. Tanya positioned herself in a strange combat pose, her fists raised in readiness and her gaze set on the creature. Patrick sensed the Russian was ready to fight but without a weapon there was nothing they could do.

Patrick could not help but cower. His life had not prepared him to stand against this threat; it had been a carefree existence. Golf, good food and girls (though the ratios changed as he aged). He had missed the Great War – the same conflict young Michael Leigh had faced bravely – as well as most of life’s challenges that forged courage.

He was a simple man who had never stared into the eyes of death.

*This is who you are*, his frightened mind wept in his head. *A terrified man frightened of dying and frightened of living. You claim to have principles but you’ve never fought for them, never sacrificed for them. You sailed through life but the winds of fortune only brought you to its*

*natural conclusion and you'll die without doing anything noble with your life.*

Time froze. The creature bore down on its prey, Tanya's stance wavered as panic gripped her tightly, Christopher was still searching for Sara and Patrick felt his feet edging closer to the cliff. Death and darkness had cornered them, both preparing to strike.

The despair was broken by a shrill whistle.

All three abductees turned their heads towards the whistler standing alone in the rain further along the edge of the dais just as lightning framed the sky.

'Here kitty-kitty,' Gareth Oakley yelled at the beast through a wily grin.



## eleven

The beast turned towards Gareth, snarling in anger. Everything else but the rain was motionless until another crack of lightning filled the sky with electricity. The schoolteacher stood alone and defenceless on the edge of the cliff over a hundred metres away. A hefty wind, maybe even the wind of fortune, whistled through the trees and breathing was suspended until the beast started to run.

‘Gareth,’ Patrick shouted but the beast was bearing down on him too quickly. It sprinted with a raw fury and roared as it galloped.

But Gareth did not move.

*The lad’s crazy, Patrick thought. Run, damn it, run.*

Gareth did not move.

‘Gareth!’

In the flash of fresh lightning, the intensity in the teacher’s eyes sparkled as he stared down the advancing creature, one arm behind his back. That intensity burned through the falling rain like a flame. Patrick had never seen such focus on the young man’s face but still he did not move.

Closer and closer. The angle of escape disappeared.

Closer and closer. Gareth’s feet pivoted right on the precipice.

Closer and closer...

With just a few feet between them, the beast leapt through the air leaving a trail of saliva on the breeze as it flew. Powerful legs pushed it high and fast, fur glistening as it soared, fangs primed to sink into Gareth’s throat.

Still he did not move.

*Too late...*

At the last possible moment, the teacher took a step backwards and calmly dropped off the edge of the edge of the cliff.

Without a throat to connect with, the beast howled in anger as it flew into nothing and plummeted into the chasm. A savage cry echoed until it was silenced by a distant crash.

Shock gripped Patrick as silence returned to the dais. Christopher and Tanya were frozen by the same disbelief, rain slinking down their expressionless faces. Dusk darkness seemed more potent as only the leaves and the grass dared move.

‘Gareth,’ Patrick barely whispered and began trudging in a daze towards the spot where Gareth had disappeared. Tears began mixing with the rainwater as his weary legs pulled him towards the precipice oblivious to the shock of the others. Had he just witnessed the senseless death of the charming Welshman who had saved them all?

His hand was reaching tentatively towards the precipice when another hand reached up suddenly and grabbed the edge of the cliff.

‘Patrick,’ Gareth’s voice called up clearly from the chasm, ‘if that’s you...give us a hand, will you?’

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‘I noticed a ledge just beneath the edge of the cliff, just wide enough to stand on. A bit of fine balancing and precision timing, that’s all it needed. This helped, mind.’

Gareth dusted the mud from his jeans and held out what he had concealed behind his back; a thick stretch of vine tied to his belt. Patrick leant over the dais to behold the dizzying scene for himself. The beast was gone, the river that had swallowed its corpse cut a swathe through the base of the chasm. The ledge he had balanced on was barely wide enough for size ten trainers.

‘See,’ Gareth shrugged, ‘piece of cake.’

*Standing in the path of a rabid beast, coaxing it to attack then jumping five feet onto a slender ledge above a deep chasm...we’re a long way from the classroom, huh? So why did you do it?*

*Because I knew I would be okay.*

‘You okay, Patrick?’



The Scot nodded slowly before dragging his eyes from the drop. ‘Aye, lad.’ It was all he could manage as his ashen features shimmered in the rain, making him look frail and innocent like an infirm grandfather.

Gareth patted him on the back then turned to Tanya and Christopher, an echo of Patrick’s shock playing on their faces. The Russian reached a hand forward and touched his cheek, a soft embrace that he guessed was just to confirm whether he was real.

‘Where did you come from?’ she asked.

‘There’s a cave that leads into the mountainside. It’s not far...’

Suddenly Christopher seemed to snap out of the trance that had paralysed him and stepped forward, eyes burning brightly with some sort of panic. It was not ignited by what had just happened; there was something else. Something important.

‘Gareth, you need to know. I found...’

As quickly as he snapped into that panic, it bled away as his eye caught something moving in the jungle.

‘Sara?’

They all turned as the teenager trudged out of the undergrowth, damp hair clinging to her sorry face, her blurry eyes an indication she had been crying. Her top was caked in mud and she walked with such a weary limp that her shoes squelched as she approached. Just a few feet away she collapsed to her knees and began crying uncontrollably.

‘Sara,’ Christopher repeated and ran forward, dropping to his knees to throw his arms around the poor girl’s quivering frame.

All was quiet until Patrick broke the shocked silence. ‘Are you all right, lass? I mean, you fell? How...’

She lifted her head out of Christopher’s shoulder, sorrow filling her eyes. ‘That thing...it ran past me. I was on the floor and...I thought I was dead.’

Tears overwhelmed her and she buried her head into Christopher’s embrace. With the rain soaking them all and darkness dominating the world again, Gareth watched this surreal scene until Patrick gripped his shoulder and pulled his attention back into focus with the world.

‘We found a path,’ the Scot began talking hurriedly, panic merging with anxiety in his words, ‘it led up the mountain, only...only it isn’t a mountain. Gareth, lad, this is a volcano!’

All four of the tired travellers turned to him at once, different expressions on different faces that all looked pale in the shadows. When he smiled, those four grave expressions became one confused whole.

‘Yeah, I know. Don’t worry about it.’

Christopher leapt up from the ground, leaving Sara still curled up in a quivering mass. ‘What do you mean, “don’t worry about it”, huh? We’re all in danger, you idiot. That thing could erupt any minute and kill us all.’

‘That thing saved us all, actually,’ Gareth squared up to Christopher, sensing the same serenity in his voice he had first experienced when dealing with the irate Sergeant Grady.

‘What do you mean, saved us all?’

‘Look, it’s a long story and we’ve got to help Matthew, I left him and Michael...’

‘No,’ the music producer interrupted, taking another step forward, ‘what do you mean, Gar?’

*Careful with this one, Gareth’s tired mind warned him. Simon Grady was a professionally trained soldier who could inflict damage swiftly and precisely. This guy is a little rougher around the edges; he looks like he’d sooner head-butt you right between the eyes than trip you up.*

The two men were toe-to-toe, their locked gaze turning the rain into steam.

‘The volcano was connected to the energy source in Carbonek; it was powered by geothermal energy and after you guys left, we found an engine room underneath the facility. We managed to fix the problem and stop the volcano from erupting but Matthew’s hurt. We’ve been lost in the catacombs for hours and I need help carrying him back to Base Camp.’

This time it was his turn to step closer into the tall Cockney’s face.

‘Happy now?’

Christopher’s gaze was burning hot until Patrick stepped between them, placing a hand gingerly on both men’s shoulders.

‘All right, lads, let’s calm down. Let’s just find Matthew and Michael so we can get back home. Everyone must be worried about us by now.’

For the first time in hours, an image of Bryony James flashed across Gareth’s mind. She would be worried knowing he had not planned to go far yet he had been missing the whole day. The thought calmed any anger that had started to build in his own head.

‘Good point, Pat. The entrance to the catacombs is this way.’

He stepped away from Christopher and delved back into the jungle, heading towards the spot where the tunnels had finally opened out onto fading daylight. How they had found their way out of that unending catacomb was as miraculous as his duel with the beast.

*I don't know about miracles but I knew we'd make it out of the tunnels. Before I even knew about that beast and the others, I knew what was going to happen and that everything would be fine. I jumped because the vision showed me what would happen if I did. Just like in the tunnel earlier.*

Putting aside the million questions that premonition had raised, Gareth pushed on. With his back to the others, he missed Patrick's low whistle of relief before the Scot started following. He missed the frustration that bled from Christopher as he strode back to Sara, helped her to her feet and guided her into the jungle. He missed the flash of lightning that filled the sky when only one abductee remained.

Gareth missed the expression that washed over Tanya's face as she retrieved the old service revolver she had stolen from Patrick (the weapon she had almost forgotten about), checked the chambers then concealed the weapon again.



## twelve

‘Home sweet home, huh?’

Gareth glanced up wearily as Patrick uttered the first indication they had finally found the place that had been eluding them. They had stumbled through the pitch-black jungle for hours in silence (at one point, Gareth thought he could hear a sonic boom in the distance but the noise faded quickly). The Scot was the first to break through a dense patch of greenery and when the exhausted travellers joined him, they stared up collectively at Carbonek.

The building was one great dome from the outside, snuggled against the base of the volcano at the end of a winding grey path that led down to the cliff, over an inexplicably suspended stone bridge and across to the far side of the chasm. Surrounded by a wild assortment of trees and wild shrubbery, the sight was at once glorious and confounding.

Hardly a glint of moonlight was breaking through the blanket of black clouds (Gareth could not remember noticing whether a moon actually circled this planet). Thunder had died away but rain still poured down relentlessly. The fact that some had started thinking of this alien structure as home sent a shiver down his soaked spine.

*Someone has to ask, might as well be me; what happens if you don't find a way home, Gaz? Can you ever accept an abandoned alien laboratory as home? At some point, you'll have to start thinking practically if you want to survive.*

He pushed the irritating voice aside and turned to his companions. Michael and Christopher were carrying the wounded coalminer's stretcher with the silent Sara staying close to the music producer. Patrick was ahead whilst Tanya had drifted to the rear of the procession.

*This might be your new family,* that voice got in the last word before falling silent, victorious.

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The entrance into the southern corridor was infested with darkness and Christopher felt his grip on the stretcher slipping as his eyes adjusted. The high, curved ceilings echoed every breath. At least the rain could not reach them inside the facility.

Or the monsters.

‘Was it ever this dark before?’ Patrick asked from wherever he was, the quiver in the lardo’s voice resonating.

‘Give it a minute,’ the teacher spoke calmly from deeper in the shadows.

Christopher could see what Simon Grady found so annoying about this pathetic little man with only the fact that he had freed the first of the survivors in his favour. Gareth was not superior in any way. This punk was so many rungs beneath him on so many ladders, he did not have the strength to quantify the gap between them as men.

*So far, he’s survived by chance, he thought in a dark voice. He was lucky to be the first to escape when most of the chambers were locked, lucky to get so many weak fools in the group that would follow his lead...he was lucky to find out about the volcano before I could announce it.*

That had scuppered his plans to turn the group away from Gareth. The Scourge of London should be returning as the triumphant explorer with news that would save everyone from danger and earn their respect. It would have been the start to sowing seeds of doubt in Gareth’s followers. With some gentle manipulation, that would eventually result in his emergence as leader of the Remainders.

Now Christopher needed a Plan B.

‘This way,’ Gareth said, stepping slowly into the darkness.

The others shuffled forward including Michael at the other end of the stretcher. The movement caused Christopher’s grip to slip and the stretcher jolted causing the helpless coalminer to grimace.

‘Sorry, Matt,’ he apologised with more sincerity in his voice than warranted.

‘Don’t fret,’ Matthew sighed with a slight strain in his usually-booming voice.

Christopher licked his lips and leaned closer to the stretcher, shifting the brunt of the weight to be taken by his shoulders. He did not want the others to hear this conversation and the corridor had a habit of echoing words inappropriately.

‘Day you’ve had, I bet you’ll be glad to get home.’

‘Well,’ came the answer after a contemplative pause, ‘I do miss my wife terribly so. Our anniversary is coming soon and...’

‘I meant Base Camp. Sorry, should’ve been clearer. I suppose we’re all starting to think of this place as home, huh?’

The next pause was even longer. ‘I’ve not given up hope, Christopher. Even if I have to crawl with one broken leg across the stars, I will see my Ffion again.’

‘But what if we don’t get home?’ Christopher dropped his voice to a whisper. ‘How long would you carrying on hoping to stumble across the answers or praying someone will save us?’

It was intended as the first seed of doubt planted in the idiot coalminer’s head, a suggestion that would breed despair and annihilate optimism. It was intended as a test of resolve for the most backward member of the Reminders. It was meant to make the big lug admit he had a limit.

This time, there was no pause.

‘Until there’s not a breath in my body.’

Christopher forced a smile even though Matthew could not see him. ‘Good on you, sunshine.’

‘Hey,’ Patrick hissed, ‘there’s a light ahead.’

Sure enough, the darkness was blurring ahead. A pale ember burned further up the tunnel, its flickering outlined the walls more clearly.

‘It’s c-c-coming from th-the courtyard,’ Michael’s whisper was even softer than the Scot’s. Maybe his eyes were sharper from crawling through trenches or whatever he did back in the war.

‘Everyone quiet,’ Gareth ordered and Christopher pictured him turning with a finger on his lips like he was shushing his bleeding school kids.

*I can’t cope with this. As soon as these fools realise we’re stuck on this planet, they’ll let him boss us around all the time. We’ll be under his rule and what is he? He’s just a sodding teacher.*

His grip tightened on the stretcher as they silently tiptoed towards whatever created that unexpected light. Anger was boiling inside him as

he imagined life under the Oakley regime. Unending fruit forages, counselling sessions, delusions of hope in a daily routine of futility...maybe he would start classes.

The group crept through the diminishing shadows and every footfall for the Scourge of London was another step into the vision of their future. Day after day of being told what to do by a man who probably could not even control the brats in his class, days turning into years with this punk as supreme ruler of the planet.

*None of them can see it, the voice inside his head was practically screaming. These idiots don't realise I should be their leader. I'm stronger, smarter, I'm better than them. If anyone should be making decisions and telling people what to do, it should be me!*

The end of the tunnel drew closer and there was no doubt about the flickering source of light in the courtyard. A small fire burned where none of them had expected one.

*I probably make more money than the lot of them put together, I've overseen million pound contract negotiations, I've turned street jobs into singing sensations overnight. None of these incompetents have a fraction of my ability and they can't even see it.*

They reached the end of the tunnel...

*They don't understand, they don't. I should be in charge 'round here, none of them could survive without me. What's it going to take to convince them?*

A slouched figure was kneeling beside the fountain where two burning torches had been erected either side of a pair of branches tied into a cross using vines. It stood like a decent approximation of a crucifix and the figure was praying towards it as the group entered the courtyard.

'Bryony?'

At the sound of Gareth's surprised voice, the figure turned so her face was partly illuminated by firelight. She had changed out of that classical sequinned dress into practical jeans and a baggy, moth-eaten jumper. When she turned towards the group, he stopped fuming, thinking and breathing.

Her sapphire eyes sparkled with shock, illuminated by the pale light without losing the potency of her sorrow. A quiver passed over her gaping mouth, forcing a tear to spill down her cheek. In that oversized jumper, her slender, supple frame seemed precious and fragile. The beauty she was blessed with shimmered with shock.



Christopher realised her eyes were focused on one traveller in particular. Her sorrow suddenly seemed to melt away just as her disbelief did.

‘Gareth?’

She leapt up and ran across the courtyard, blending grace with uncontrollable emotion before she threw herself into the teacher’s arms. A sob escaped her dainty lips as she spun in his grasp, hugging him like she never wanted to let him go.

‘I thought...you were dead,’ she sighed through her pain.

Gareth pushed aside the confusion and that unsettling calmness returned to his voice. ‘I wouldn’t go and do a thing like that, would I?’

The whole group fell silent as they watched the embrace painted in golden flecks of firelight. It was a touching scene, an emotional reunion between two people who had grown close in spite of the adversity they faced.

*I’ll get rid of Gareth*, Christopher Veroni thought with more venom and hatred than he had ever known, *even if I have to kill him myself*.



## thirteen

‘What’s that?’

It took a few seconds for Anna to realise Denise was speaking to her. Not that it was difficult to figure out as they were the only two people in the cramped little storage room, as they had been for about twenty hours. Her delay was a result of her vacant state of mind; she was mentally not in the same room as the English Rose.

Mentally she was back in New York, lounging in the second-hand wicker chair she had picked up at a furniture store in Little Italy and listening to some classic Green Day above the sound of traffic filtering through the open window. A cigarette still smouldered in the ash tray, mingling with the stale aftertaste of incense that always lingered around her apartment.

A perfect day.

When Denise’s voice dragged her out of her daydream, Anna was back in the storage room stretched on her back beside the invisible doorway with two words scrawled in the grey dirt floor.

*He’s coming.*

She frowned down at the words before shrugging in response. ‘Must have just doodled it.’

‘Doodled it?’

‘Yeah, I guess. Maybe I was thinking about Gareth coming to rescue us.’ It did not sound right.

‘Maybe Gareth can’t make it or something. It’s been hours.’

‘Matthew and Michael know where we are.’

‘Maybe they’re all dead.’

Anna could not help herself; she actually entertained the notion. Not her style, looking on the bleak side but the situation was drastic.

Assuming everything had gone as planned with Gareth and the others, they should have noticed that the group was two short a long time ago. But that was a massive assumption.

‘Maybe.’

Denise’s jaw dropped. ‘How can you say that?’

A tired frown spread across Anna’s face. ‘Didn’t you just say it first?’

‘Yeah but you’re not supposed to agree with me. You should be saying that they’re all fine, that everything’s going to be all right, someone will be here any minute.’

She rolled her eyes. ‘To be honest, I’m too tired.’

*And worried. Because someone should have realised we were missing and come looking for us, even if it wasn’t Gareth it should’ve been someone although why wouldn’t it be him, I mean, it must already be night-time by now and he wouldn’t let anybody stay away from camp for so long without looking for them or at least sending someone else. No, something’s really wrong.*

She was not usually the pessimist; her lifestyle did not allow her to think negatively because admitting defeat was not an option in the life of Anna Ford. She had learnt that a negative attitude dents ambition and wounds morale to the point that inaction becomes the only option in every decision. Anna could not allow negativity to rule any aspect of her life.

‘When my father used to come home from work,’ she found herself saying, ‘sometimes, I would still be up because I was overtired or something. So my mother would send him up to my room and he’d tell me about his day.’

Denise could evidently sense the discomfort in Anna’s voice. She slowly lowered herself to sit in the middle of the room beside Anna, two frightened woman in a small, enclosed cage.

‘Sometimes,’ Anna sighed, ‘he would talk about his work, about the people that died on his operating table. His voice, it would always be soft and light like he was reading me a fairytale but I would listen to his words and fall asleep with images of people dying. Eight, nine years old and I was plagued by dreams of death but...’

She paused, swallowed hard and looked up to catch Denise’s eye.

‘...I would always wake up and my father would always go back to work and keep on trying.’

A tickle at the back of Anna's throat caused her to cough dryly. This was edging towards a difficult conversation. It was always hard to admit that someone who detested you was still your hero.

Denise tried to keep her gaze steady but failed, dropping it to the ground awkwardly. Anna immediately felt she was to blame. Her sappy reminiscing had reminded the English Rose of the gravity of their situation and caused her pain. Anna Forbes did not have it in her to cause others pain.

Especially not her English Rose.

'Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to go on like that.'

'Don't be daft,' Denise replied softly, a tear forming in the corner of one eye, 'it's not like any of this is your fault. Besides, I'm sure we'll be just groovy. I bet one of the others will be coming through that door-things any minute soon.'

Anna rolled her eyes. 'Yeah, if you believe in miracles.'

'You don't?'

'Not really.'

Given her infatuation with the spiritual world and fate in general, it surprised Anna herself. She respected the notion of faith, she even respected others who believed in the idea that great things happen just by believing in them. But her life had taught her not to rely on the constellations for getting things done in life.

*Daddy taught you better than that, didn't he? Because he knew the world was a harsh place, he saw it on his operating table every day and he wanted to make sure that I'd be ready for whatever the world threw at me...only it wasn't Earth he needed to prepare me for, was it?*

'We all need something to believe in, Anna. I believe someone will find us.'

'Fine, if that's what keeps you going.'

'Well, what keeps you going?'

'I don't know, Denise.'

*What keeps me going? How about the tender touch of another woman, one with sweet lips that taste of cherries and smooth skin cool to touch? Not hope. Hope is almost as useless around here as faith. Hope is not enough to believe in.*

'Come on,' Denise pushed softly, unaware that Anna wanted the conversation to end, 'what's keeping you so strong in spite of all this craziness?'

Anna turned away, her eyes scanning the items on the shelves as though one of them would be capable of sailing this discussion into calmer waters. When the silence started to linger, Denise broke it softly.

‘I wanted to be strong. I just never knew how to be. When Mr Norman would...put his hands on my leg, I wanted to be strong enough to tell him to leave me alone.’

Anna turned back, her eyes meeting Denise’s. The tension was back, the uneasy atmosphere from Denise’s confession that her former employer used his influence to seduce her at work. Against her will, Mr Norman had forced himself on her and threatened to fire her if the affair went public. A despicable act but the Seventies had not been a highpoint for equality in the workplace.

*And what do I have that makes me so perfect? I live alone in an empty apartment with a dead-end job that can’t even pay the bills, I don’t talk to my family any more and I binge drink with friends to numb the constant pain. Why is my life so perfect? What makes me so strong?*

‘I’m not strong.’

‘You’re stronger than I am.’

‘Why?’

‘You just are, you know.’

‘I’m not strong, Denise. I make mistakes, I drink too much, I trust the wrong kind of people, I waste my life chasing silly little dreams, I dance like a fool around strangers and even my family to protect a secret I shouldn’t even be worried about keeping. I’m weak, not strong.’

‘What secret?’

‘That I’m gay.’

Those three words were out of her mouth before she could stop herself. It was the last thing she wanted to admit to in front of anyone on this alien planet especially...

Denise’s mouth dropped open, her eyes sparkled and her breath was caught in her lungs. ‘You’re gay?’

The moment was upon the two women. The truth was finally out. Anna was almost afraid to discover how either of them would react but there was no opportunity for reactions.

The door to the storage room suddenly melted out of existence, dissolving to leave nothing but the arched doorway. It was replaced by the lean shadow of young Michael Leigh. The medic took two shuffling steps inside before nervously addressing the shocked women.

‘Hey, um...Gareth s-s-sent me to find you. Are you okay?’

A few seconds passed before a relieved whimper burst out of Anna Forbes’ mouth.





## fourteen

Emily Wade's eyes carried an emptiness that reflected the shock clinging to her cold-to-touch face. A ringlet of brittle blonde hair had fallen across her mouth, which was pale and cracked like a dry desert. Death was sucking the essence from her marrow but her silence unsettled Gareth the most.

He was kneeling beside her body on the far side of Base Camp. Rainwater still dripped from his hair and every inch of his body felt burdened with fatigue but once Bryony explained what had happened, this was always going to be the first place he would go.

Because he...

His eyes closed softly.

*Someone will have to tell her husband, he thought solemnly. The CEO of that airline; he probably only realised she was missing when his bank account got back in the black but still...*

That was unfair. Emily had been loud and boisterous – to some in the group, she had been rude and obnoxious – but had she deserved to die? Was it fair to survive the domed imprisonment that had left so many skeletons in the alien chambers only to be killed by...

'It happened so fast,' Bryony, who had appeared unnoticed at his side, spoke as though she had been reading his mind. 'One minute, we were arguing about pressing the button and the next, her body was lying on the floor. I was so concerned about Claire that I never saw what happened.'

He opened his eyes to behold a heart-stopping symphony of emotions on her face, a melody of lilting magnificence amid sombre tones of despair. The First Dame of the Silver Screen had a face sculpted from heartache. Grace and dejection were similar colours on the canvass of her beauty.

'Don't blame yourself,' he could barely get the words out.

‘Who should I blame?’

‘It was an accident, Bryony. If you’d pushed that button...’

He could not finish his sentence; it was not right to prefer the death of one person to another. A flash of his dream – of the fear in her eyes as he drew a lethal weapon in front of her – skipped across his mind but he pushed it aside.

Because he...

He redirected his gaze out through the laboratory archway, where the bloodied body of the beast lay in a tangled lump of limbs, fur and drying maroon mud.

‘How did you kill it again?’

There was a pause and he noticed a new set of expressions dancing over her face; one was definitely awkwardness, an uneasy anxiety he knew all about. The other...if he did not believe she was incapable of it, he could have sworn there was a hint of anger in Bryony’s emerald eyes.

‘I found this.’

There was definitely something upsetting her. It crept into her voice, straining it like a taught string on an instrument. She reached across to the nearest oval table and picked up a heavy object.

Suddenly Gareth realised why she was angry.

He had forgotten about the futuristic gun he had lifted from the dead cop’s holster. It seemed like an eternity ago when he had discovered it during an inspection of the first laboratory, when the incident with Denise Newman panicked him into dumping it in the bundle of scavenged clothes.

*Not the smartest hiding place in the world, Gaz. Where’s the one place people, who have been wearing the same clothes in a humid jungle environment for a week of stress and toil, would never think to look? In a bundle of new clothes. Gold star.*

‘What is this?’ Bryony asked, forcing him back into focus.

‘I found it on one of the corpses. The man looked like some sort of policeman only his clothes were...like he was from the future, see. I picked it up but never had a chance to figure out how to work it.’

‘And you just left it in a pile of clothes?’ Disbelief and horror were the newest combination from Bryony’s hidden repertoire. ‘What if Claire had found it? She’s just a kid, she could’ve been killed.’

He rose to his feet, fighting to control his voice. ‘There wasn’t time. Denise was...’

‘What do you mean “wasn’t time”, Gareth? This thing practically blew apart that creature and it was just waiting for anyone to find it. Is that not something worth taking time to deal with?’

It was a fair reprimand, he knew it. And he still had not even informed the others about the hidden storage room.

‘You’re right. I’m sorry.’

The shock of Emily’s death was still tangible at the back of his throat; the apology came out dry and lacking conviction. It reflected back at him in those eyes and her reply made him feel rotten.

‘Being sorry doesn’t bring anybody back to life. If I were you, I’d get rid of it.’

Bryony’s lip began to quiver and she turned away, striding towards the concerned group clustered around Matthew Somerset.

*The movie star’s right, Gaz. Mistakes cost lives in this place. Bryony knows her decision may have led to Emily’s death and no amount of remorse will ever bring her back from the dead.*

*Maybe it’s deeper. She just killed something in self-defence and I bet it’s the first time she’s ever taken a life. Perhaps I should just get rid of that dangerous weapon or else the next mistake could cost an even higher price.*

With a lump in his throat, he leant over the Texan’s body and lifted her arm by the wrist. Her skin was icy despite the humidity filling Carbonek. As his stomach somersaulted, he gently slipped the wedding ring off her rigid finger. An intricate gold band encrusted with five diamonds encompassing a larger diamond.

“Sorry” did not bring people back to life but it was a word spinning inside Gareth’s head like a vulture circling a corpse. Only in his head, the dead body had his face with his open eyes and his scruffy mop of hair draped across his cold, cracked mouth. Being sorry would not save him this time.

Because he was to blame.

Emily Wade was dead and it was his fault. He was supposed to be the leader of this group; a distinction he had never wanted, one he never felt worthy of but it had become a fact. The others – well, most of them – looked to him for hope and encouragement, reassurance and salvation. He had wrestled with that burden since the Explorers left and it had finally defeated him.

Sighing, his eyes found Bryony across the room listening to a conversation without even registering it.

*Save your faith for something worth believing in, Bryony. Because that's not me.*

Gareth did not feel the diamonds dig into his palm as he clenched his fist around the precious jewel of a woman he should have been there to save.

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Michael did not notice someone standing behind him until the young medic leaned back to stretch out the weariness in his back. He almost jumped when he realised Gareth was silently watching him tend to his latest patient.

‘Gareth...you startled me.’

No apologies; “sorry” suddenly seemed like a hollow word to Gareth. ‘How is she?’

Michael shrugged though his shoulders barely moved. ‘Hard to say. She’s just a-a-asleep as far as I can tell. Like Denise was, yeah?’

No reassurances; there was not one that would work in this situation. ‘Is she comfortable?’

‘I think so but there’s no w-way of knowing. If something happened to her inside that chamber w-when the power came back, it could be like w-what sent us all to sleep.’

A part of Gareth, his instinctual part, had to hypothesise. ‘If the chamber induces a deep sleep or coma, it might be difficult to get her out of this trance. It kept us in suspended animation for years. We still don’t really understand how this equipment works.’

The others were settling down for sleep that would not come easy for any of them. Even Patrick’s group, who had spent most of the day descending a volcano, would find fatigue losing a battle against their worries. The medic kept his voice low even though nobody else could hear him.

‘You know, G-Gareth, Denise wants to try using the a-alien devices again. If she can ...’

‘No way.’

Michael looked shocked at the defiance but Gareth pressed on without taking his eyes from Claire Stewart’s unconscious body laid gently across an empty chamber bed.

‘That technology knocked out Denise twice, put Claire into this sleep and killed Emily. Nobody’s touching anything in this building anymore, understood?’

‘But if the technology brought us here, it could be the answer to sending us back,’ Michael argued, real conviction and strength in his voice for the first time. It went unnoticed.

‘Too risky; we’re not putting more lives in danger. We’ll just look elsewhere for the way home.’

The medic’s mouth gaped, an uneasy silence replacing the words he wanted.

‘Get some sleep, Michael.’

‘I thought we were taking first watch together?’

He sighed deeply, unable to stop weariness infiltrating his own voice. ‘It’s not worth keeping two-man shifts; there’re so few of us left.’

Michael nodded despondently before ambling away. With the rest of the group settling in for some overdue sleep (dawn on the eighth day of their abduction was only a few hours away), Base Camp suddenly fell quiet. The medic did not hear what Gareth muttered breathlessly as he smoothed a strand of hair off the young girl’s face.

‘And I’ve got some thinking to do.’



## fifteen

For Bryony James, sleep seemed a long time coming. The sensation was a deception; she only spent ten minutes tossing and turning on the ground (unwilling to trust the comfort of the beds, paranoid about being trapped again) before succumbing to weariness. But those ten minutes felt like ten hours.

She worried about Claire Stewart, an innocent child who had latched onto her like a stray puppy sensing compassion in a passing stranger. The poor girl had suffered terribly on the first day with her original imprisonment scarring her ever since. The second time around, Bryony had not reached her in time to save her.

*Not that she's my child or anything,* she thought as she turned on her side, *I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Gareth was the one who saved her. He saved us all.*

She worried about the enigmatic teacher for most of her battle with weariness. Perhaps she had been out of order shouting at him earlier. His friendship had been her only source of hope and strength. Under such incredible circumstances, she probably should have broken down a lot sooner.

*It was seeing him in the courtyard appearing through the fire-lit shadows like he did. I really thought he was dead, him and the others, after what I saw in the engine room.*

She worried about the group as a whole; the Reminders appeared strained and emotions were spilling out of people almost whimsically. Yesterday had been a struggle for them all. There were so few left in contrast to the group that had first awoken from their unexplained slumber.

She worried about Emily Wade.

Worry was just one emotion screaming at her whenever the image of the Texan woman slipped into her mind. Bryony had hardly known her and there were honestly aspects of Emily's personality she did not particularly like. Somehow, that made her guilt more potent.

*Hard, isn't it? Responsibility.*

That voice was definitely her mother's and Bryony forced her eyes shut so tight that when she opened them again, white spots skipped across her vision. The snide voice had gone. She did not want another episode of delusions brought about by stress (the obvious explanation for recurring images of her mother).

But it was true; responsibility was a challenge Bryony never really felt prepared for, especially when it involved others. Jeopardising herself was easier than putting somebody else in that position. Running away from home and starting a new life in LA had been her responsibility, as had listening to Mr Whyte.

Oscar Whyte was the sleazy agent who had discovered her as a teenage waif working at a Hollywood diner. A bulbous man in a brown suit who liked his eggs easy over. His overweight frame creaked when he moved and a few strands of grey hair were combed over his skull like the last fibres of a thread-bare carpet. The yellowness of his teeth reminded her of stains on the ceiling in her shared apartment.

'Trust me, doll,' he had drooled over her on that fateful spring day, 'you're made for the talking pictures, you are. That face, that sublime figure, the sadness that seems to eek out of your pores even when you're smiling. It'll be poetry on the screen, I tell you.'

'Why me?' she asked bashfully, still refusing to believe his story despite the business card he had thrust into her apron as she poured him coffee. 'I ain't never done no acting. There must be prettier girls around than me, surely.'

'None I've ever seen and none who can make an impression with a first glance like you, Britney.'

'Bryony.'

'Whatever, toots. Point is, you're a nugget of pure gold. My bosses will go weak at the knees when you walk through the door on Tuesday.'

'Oh, I can't Tuesday. My roommate has this thing...'

'Take my advice, doll,' Oscar finally dropped the sick smile he had been wearing since he had spotted her leaning across a table to clean a spill, 'make the most of the opportunities that come your way. Fate has a



way of presenting choices for us but only you can make sure it's the right one. Don't blow it.'

Fate had decided it would be Emily Wade who would die when the alien technology powered back into life. Bryony had made sure it was the right choice by forcing Emily into position, ready for death to snatch her. She closed her eyes and finally drifted to sleep with a final thought passing casually through her dreams.

Because she was to blame.

When she woke up well-earned hours later, the first thought that jumped into her waking mind was the pain in her shoulder where she had curled up on a folded jumper for a pillow. The second thought was that she was to blame for the death of Emily Wade.

The third thought, whatever it was going to be, got interrupted when she noticed a shadow across her body. The shadow of somebody standing over her. When she blinked away the crust from her eyes, all other thoughts bled away.

'Claire?'

The young redhead from Cardiff stood over Bryony with a vacant expression on her freckled face.

Bryony pushed herself to her knees, weariness still clinging to her limbs. She threw her arms around the girl and exhaled with a sob that escaped her mouth. 'I was so worried about you.'

When there was no response, Bryony thought maybe she was clutching the girl too tight. The relief at seeing her alive was so overwhelming, all she wanted to do was hug her forever. Though she had never even considered having children before, she guessed the sensation was what some mothers called "maternal instinct" (though not her mother).

When there was still no answer, she realised her grip and gazed into Claire's eyes.

'Sweetie, you all right?'

It was a long time before Claire opened her mouth to answer in a slow, deliberate voice that sounded unlike anything Bryony had heard from the girl previously. Even when she had been suffering from that initial trauma, it had been the strength of her voice betraying her words. This time even her words sounded wrong.

'I'm fine.'

'Are you sure, Claire? You look so pale...'

With worry rushing back to her, she glanced around the room. The group were still collectively sleeping, a faint soundtrack of snoring filled the void. There were so few people left in the group it did not take her long to realise someone was missing.

Gareth was nowhere to be seen.

Pushing that fact – as well as the questions it brought – aside she singled out Michael Leigh, draped over the side of a distant chamber, as the next appropriate source of support.

‘Come on, hun,’ she whispered and pulled Claire gently by the arm in his direction. Reaching the medic, Bryony nudged him gently until he stirred into life.

His quaint, almost childlike voice groaned as he stumbled back into the waking world. ‘Wha’...is it my shift, Gar?’

‘Michael, it’s Bryony.’

‘Bryony?’ he groaned, an arm reaching up to rub his heavy eyes. ‘What time is it?’

‘I don’t know,’ she sighed impatiently, ‘but someone here needs your help.’

That prompted him into life, a call to noble action drilled into a soldier young enough to believe in its meaning. He dragged himself up on his elbows and glanced around, first finding the movie star’s smile (which brought out a tired blush in his cheeks) before noticing who stood next to her.

‘Claire?’

‘Michael.’

Bryony frowned at the strange toneless quality of her voice as the medic swung off his chamber bed fighting an instinctual yawn. He checked her eyes, opened her mouth for an inspection, even felt her pulse with his quivering finger. When he turned to Bryony, there was a smile starting to stretch across his face.

‘She looks f-fine to me. Not that I really understood what was wrong with her in the first place but her pulse feels as steady as it did before, stronger even.’

It was not enough to satisfy Bryony who turned back to Claire. ‘Do you know what happened to you, sweetie?’

Another long pause before an answer could form. ‘I was in the chamber. It closed. I woke up.’

It definitely did not sound like the little girl she barely knew but after the scenarios that had shaped Bryony's nightmares, it was an enormous relief just to see her awake. Without any reservations, she placed a hand gently on Claire's shoulder and it brought the girl's gaze up to meet hers.

Claire smiled in a slow, unnatural manner.

'That's right,' Michael smiled, not quite awake enough to get the same sense of unease. 'It made you sleep just like the machine made Denise sleep, remember? You were...'

He stopped, frowned then gazed around the room. Even without natural light, it felt like morning had arrived. Some of the others had started to stir at the sound of their conversation and Anna was sitting up on a nearby chamber. But the medic was not looking for her.

'Where's Gareth?'



## sixteen

Christopher was roused from a familiar old dream. Not exactly a recurring dream but it occasionally made a guest appearance in his subconscious. The last remnant of a memory he seemed unable to forget.

When he was ten, he had the freedom of the 1970s East End for his upbringing. During a stroll through the rundown boroughs of London, he had been torturing a stray cat when he heard a sudden screech of tyres. He turned in time to witness a hit and run; a black Ford Capri sped down the street leaving a teenage ruffian lying on the brink of death in the street.

In reality, Christopher stood motionless as the victim reached a dying hand towards him, a desperate plea the wounded youth did not have strength to verbalise. An eternity passed as Christopher was caught in a battle between two desires; the longing to run and the duty to help. Fight or flight. The result was a stalemate; he could only watch the boy bleed to death.

In his dream, Christopher had not been motionless.

With the youth's arm flailing, he strode up to the crumpled boy and yelled angrily in his face.

'You think you're worth saving, huh? What've you ever done with your life, you bleeding waste of space? You're nothing you are, nothing. You let that car run you down because you're too stupid to see it coming, too slow to move out of its way, you were too ignorant to realise you were going to die. I'm glad I never helped you; it would've been a waste of my time.'

The dream always ended in harmony with the youth's final breath.

'Christopher?'

His eyes opened and a smile spread across his face. Sara Langley was leaning over him, two-toned hair draped across her innocent face. It was a pleasant follow-up to a harrowing dream.

‘Morning, Princess,’ he sighed before remembering where he was. He cleared his throat and pushed himself up to see what was happening around Base Camp.

The tension hit him instantly despite the sleep still clinging to him like dew to a leaf. Most of the group had gathered in a vociferous huddle with hurried discussion orchestrated by Bryony.

‘Gareth’s disappeared.’

Christopher’s eyes widened. ‘What?’

‘When the others woke up, he was totally gone. Michael and Patrick went looking for him but Patrick says it’s been, like, seven hours since we turned in and Gareth was the first on watch.’

Christopher could not stop a little smirk from appearing. The revered leader had absconded during the night, abandoning his post without even a word. How deliriously perfect.

*I can use this. Gareth’s prone to a bit of doubt and I’ll make sure everyone realises it. I can sow some seeds while they’re panicking and even if he comes back, I can make sure the group feel so abandoned Teacher will feel even worse.*

His plan to use the volcano as a catalyst for change had failed; Christopher did not like failure and he despised failing to a lesser man. When he had lost a particularly important client to a rival producer once, his response had been to slash the tyres of the executive’s prized Lamborghini and blame it on passing kids. Gareth Oakley would soon discover the repercussions of standing in the path of Christopher Veroni.

‘Why’re you smiling?’

He had momentarily forgotten about the dizzy Yank at his side. He brushed the smile from his face...

Then he stopped.

*Maybe the kid could help,* suddenly popped into his head. *She’s proven her loyalty and she’s too stupid to realise how far you would go down this path. She’s already said she wants to stay so she should be the easiest one to win around.*

‘I was just thinking how he keeps doing it,’ he said, keeping his voice low, ‘running off when the going gets tough. Not good for morale, is it?’

Sara shrugged in that quirky dumb-blond manner. ‘I guess.’

‘What this group needs is a leader who ain’t afraid to make decisions. Someone who’ll stick around when times are tough. A person with leadership experience everyone can look up to.’

A long pause as the teenage temptress bit her lip. Christopher was on the verge of suggesting someone of Italian origins (just to help her along) when realisation washed over her.

‘Someone like you. Chris, you should totally be our leader, like. You wouldn’t leave, would you?’

He appeared to consider it (knowing countless situations where he would happily sacrifice the life of anyone in the group). ‘No, I would never leave...any of you.’

Sara failed to register his last minute adjustment and grinned giddily, impressed to the point of intoxication. He wanted to stroke her smooth skin but there would be time for that later. His new plan needed urgent attention; he had one supporter but it would be more difficult to win around the others.

Suddenly the commotion of the group changed pitch as somebody jogged into the laboratory. Christopher was relieved it was the rotund Scot but that relief bled away as Patrick wheezed out his words.

‘We found him...he’s outside.’

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Gareth felt a crick in his neck as he leaned back and soaked in the ambience of morning sunshine. The harshness of the storm he had trekked through just hours ago was even more incredible considering how quickly paradise was restored.

With his shirt off, the morning breeze tickled his body. When he ran a hand through his matted hair, sweat flew off his scalp in all directions. All he needed was a lounge and a cold lager to make the day complete.

Unaware that a smile had broken out on his face, his reverie was interrupted by a shallow cough.

Gareth finally noticed the Remainers clustered in front of Carbonek. The curved entrance framed them neatly from his position a little way down the path. Bryony was at the head of the group and fixed his gaze intensely.

‘Gareth, what...’

Those two words sounded unlike the woman he had come to know as Bryony James, not the mythical First Dame of the Silver Screen he had watched on TV as a kid. That sad resolve played a symphony with her features like the golden frame on a priceless painting. But her sentence broke off when she realised what he was doing, what he had been doing since leaving Base Camp in the middle of the night, what he had been doing without a break since making a detour to the storage room to grab the discarded pickaxe.

Bryony crossed the winding path until she stood before him, the others shuffling nervously behind. They gaped in unison at the teacher standing in the second of two shallow graves.

Gareth dusted dirt off his jeans as he climbed out of the grave. The rain overnight had made the process mucky and he would have to liberate new attire from the clothes pile. After countless hours without sleep, he had created two narrow holes in the ground just deep enough for their purpose.

‘You’ve been out here all night, digging graves?’ Bryony asked with disbelief in her eyes, her voice, every part of her.

‘Yeah.’

‘Why?’

He managed to meet her gaze and tried to make her understand with his. For the sake of the others, he answered in a strong, serious voice that felt invigorating coming out of his mouth.

‘Because two people are dead. Emily and the Chinese guy we saved on the first day. He may have only been with us a short time but he died and we never even considered burying him. We just moved him out of the way, pushed him aside.’

A number of heads in the group dropped but he pushed on.

‘Of all the dead bodies in that building, those two are the most important and not just because we actually got to know them a little before they died. They were survivors like us.’

He threw down the pickaxe and strode around the graves, which he had dug to the side of the grey path leading towards the bridge. He had chosen this location for one reason; a constant reminder.

‘Those two poor souls,’ he pointed back towards Carbonek, ‘died under our watch but I don’t blame anyone here for what happened. Being sorry doesn’t bring anybody back to life.’

He caught Bryony’s eyes again but this time she could not meet his. They seemed to glisten in the sun as she turned her head until her golden



hair fell across them. Understanding what she had been through since Emily's death, he did not want to push her but he wanted her to understand it was not her fault.

Like it was not his fault.

That pearl of wisdom had dawned on him during his watch. His heart had chewed over the pain as he sat alone in the dimly lit laboratory and eventually he leapt into action. Nothing else had been in his thoughts until the others had arrived.

'Their deaths are not our responsibility,' he continued, addressing the entire group, 'but honouring them is. We're going to give them a decent memorial but they will be the last. I only dug two graves because there will only be two deaths on this planet. I don't plan for anyone else to die and I won't rest until we're all on our way back home.'

His words were potent, a sentiment that filled the Remainders with a solemn desire. They stood silently beside the freshly dug graves suddenly united in solemn cause.



## seventeen

Contemplation of murder came with a tepid draft breezing down the base of the spine. Contemplation of murder came with a numbness above the temples matched by tingling at the tips of clenched fingers. Contemplation of murder brought the Scourge of London out in a film of cold sweat.

Christopher had hated so many people in his life. Countless, really. His father had been the first victim of his hatred, worthless drunk that he was. Rivals in school had irked him, lovers who jilted him drew out his loathing like poison from a wound, he had detested random people and professional competitors over the years. Hate was an easy emotion for him, a comforting companion.

Hate was pale in comparison to what he felt as he watched Gareth Oakley.

Teacher had orchestrated a memorial service for Emily Wade and the Chinese stiff (Patrick had ruffled through his wallet for ID and discovered the poor sod's name was Li Sun Chi). Emotions were palpable across the group as they solemnly covered the grey, lifeless corpses in grey, lifeless dirt. Everyone else loitered idly as Christopher cooled his upper body with water transported from the nearby stream.

*Son of a bitch knew what he was doing, cycloned through his mind. That little speech was supposed to increase his stranglehold on these idiots. He's going to manipulate the entire group so we'll keep searching this damned place for answers that aren't here and he'll keep us all in the dark for good. Someone's got to stop him.*

'Chris?'

He glanced up from his abhorrent gaze with thoughts of murder still tingling at the back of his neck. Taking a life was something he had never considered before but it was his most potent feeling as he turned around.

Standing at his side was Sara Langley and the sight made all darkened thoughts evaporate. Her blue eyes reflected the sunlight like a kaleidoscope with twice the potency of her smile. The way she pivoted on one leg, her whole body contorted in an innocent yet seductive manner that stole his breath.

‘Hey,’ he exhaled slowly, ‘you all right?’

‘Yeah, fine.’ Her smile widened and dazzled.

With thoughts of murder pushed aside, another thought bobbed to the surface of his mind. ‘Listen, I never got the chance to say, you know...’

Christopher could not finish the sentiment whilst maintaining eye contact.

‘...I’m sorry we left you in the jungle. I mean, we were running flat out and I didn’t notice you’d fallen or else I would’ve gone back for you...’

Sara raised her hand to stop his words. ‘Chris, don’t worry. It was all kinds of crazy back there, I’m just glad that beast jumped over me.’

He nodded with a weak smile of his own. ‘I just didn’t want you thinking...’

Trailing off, he suddenly realised precisely what he did not want her thinking; that he abandoned her.

*Steady on, he admonished himself. This girl’s supposed to be a convenient slice of crumpet, that’s all. A tool for my designs, a toy for my amusement, nothing else.*

Christopher cleared his throat. ‘So what happens next?’

Evidently sensing his desire to change direction in their conversation, she sidled up beside him and followed his gaze. ‘God knows. Mr Oakley obviously has some plan after that speech but he ain’t sharing it with me.’

‘With any of us.’

The disgruntled tone in her voice echoed his; an encouraging sign. She sounded as frustrated as he was which meant either she was a hollow-headed parrot or she had finally seen the stranglehold Gareth had on the abductees. He pushed on, keen to know whether it was the later or former.

‘What do you think he’s got in mind?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ she flicked aside a strand of hair that clung to the sweat on her brow. ‘I reckon he’ll probably say the technology is unsafe and that nobody should use it. Then he’ll start experimenting himself,

excluding everyone from his decision and alienating most of the group with his paranoia.'

*The later, then.*

'Yeah,' he sighed slowly, 'you're probably right.'

'So...what can we do about it?'

This time Christopher held her gaze and grinned. To her, it might have appeared confident, charismatic and charming. To him, it was a sneer of triumph.

'I don't think we should be hasty. Let's find a spot where we can talk a bit more privately.'

He lowered his voice as he talked because Bryony James was walking past carrying water for her little waif schoolgirl. If there was one person who would run to Gareth the instant she got a sniff of betrayal, it was the tantalising American.

*She'll get hers, all right. I've conned smarter blondes and Bryony will just be the crown jewel of my collection when I'm through with these idiots. This group is begging to be conquered.*

His eyes lingered on her passing form until the sensual touch of a concealed hand grazing his thigh snapped him out of his gaze.

'Would that be a...sweaty spot?'

Christopher fell into Sara's sweet eyes. A heat emanated from deep inside him, one that eclipsed the tropical touch of the sun-kissed day. Her fingers left his leg with a shiver as he recalled the promise he had made to her at the top of the volcano.

'I'm sure I could accommodate your needs, Princess.'

Without another word, he stood up and began strolling towards the facility. He sensed Sara nonchalantly follow a few seconds later, silently the way all women should. The sick mind of Christopher Veroni began contemplating a new plan as he passed Gareth without paying the teacher any respect at all.

\*\*\*\*\*

The creature inside Sara Langley's body was enjoying itself.

Christopher Veroni was an impressive physical specimen – suave appearance, toned physique, brash charisma – but the creature was enjoying its host more than the man. Hormones fuelled by passion burned inside the primed body of this teenage girl, sensations the

creature had never experienced before. Occupying the more sensual of a dual gender species had been an excellent choice.

After the funeral, they stumbled inside one of the smaller laboratories off the northern passage, locked in a heated embrace. His hands roamed wildly, their lips battled vigorously and their bodies entwined as they navigated their way onto one of the open chamber beds.

Nobody noticed them leave the gathering. Some had wandered off toward the stream whilst the medic had returned to Base Camp to check on the recovering coalminer. Christopher had been cautious until they were far enough up the passage for him to pin her against the wall and kiss her.

The creature had enjoyed it.

The creature was not meant to enjoy it.

The creature had a purpose. So far, it had failed to satisfy that purpose. The purpose would only be satisfied if Gareth Oakley was removed from his position as unofficial leader of the Remainers.

Christopher lifted up Sara's nimble frame onto the chamber bed without their lips ever parting. She responded with a girlish giggle before wrapping her legs around his waist and ripping off her "Princess" pink top.

'Wow.' The grin almost split Christopher's face before he leant into her again.

As his breath caressed her neck, the creature thought about the plan circulating in Christopher's mind. Not the plan to settle on this planet. Murder was just another sensation these humans took for granted; the response of the body when the soul inside gets pushed to straining point was a miracle to be endured, not avoided. If it came to killing the teacher, so be it.

They did not have to kill the beast, though.

The creature pushed that thought aside. An unfortunate setback as those savage animals could be useful tools. Simple minds but they made a potent impact. Now another plan was needed.

*Whatever it takes. If we have to manipulate every one of these primitives, we will. If we have to kill Gareth Oakley, we will. Even if we have to...*

As the creature stared up at the music producer through another being's eyes, its thought trailed off. It could not finish its sentence, the darkest thought it possessed. The music producer was not even staring back.

‘What’s wrong?’ the creature asked in Sara Langley’s voice.

Christopher could not respond. He was transfixed by the open doorway on the other side of the laboratory, the arch that led into the storage room. When he finally replied, the anger in his voice made the creature inside Sara Langley delirious with delight.

‘What the Hell is that?’





## eighteen

‘Fancy a walk?’

Anna waited until the group had calmed down from the emotions of the funeral before asking. It was a tense affair; Bryony recanted a few poignant passages from the Bible and Gareth led a minute of silence. It was a bitter moment of remembrance that had not been the right time to tackle the concerns still playing on her mind.

‘Sure,’ Denise replied cautiously. There was no smile on her lips but that could have been a result of the fresh pain from the funeral.

Anna nodded and began strolling towards the stone bridge at the end of the path. Others began to split away from the makeshift service, some staying to savour the sunshine. Denise fell into stride next to her and they walked in silence along the dais beside the bridge. Anna had to walk a considerable distance along the precipice of the grand chasm before she could speak.

‘That was a good service, wasn’t it?’

‘Under the circumstances,’ Denise huffed.

‘Yeah,’ she laughed softly, ‘no time to print an Order of Service, was there?’

It was a dark joke that got the response it deserved.

*Come on, girl, Anna’s mind was racing, you got to get this off your chest or there’ll be tension between the two of us until the end and I can’t live like that, I mean, can we really get by in this overgrown rainforest of death with tensions so high?*

‘You know,’ she started, blood pressure rising with each syllable, ‘we got a little interrupted yesterday, didn’t we?’

There was a long pause without either woman breaking their stride. Anna felt like the whole jungle was holding its breath waiting to find out how this conversation would turn out.

‘We did.’

Anna sucked in one deep breath and exhaled it into, ‘Yeah, like when I told you I was gay.’

Another, longer pause. Eventually, Denise’s legs stopped working and the women stopped near the edge of the cliff. Their eyes met and the atmosphere between them intensified like the tropical heat.

‘Yeah, you did,’ was all Denise could manage. Still no distinct emotions.

‘It’s not like it’s a big secret,’ Anna started babbling, ‘I mean, I haven’t told any of the others here but I’m usually pretty open about it. I don’t hide it away from the world, it’s just who I am and most people accept that about me.’

She wanted desperately for Denise to accept it. After the incident in the storage room, all Anna wanted was for Denise not to hate her for keeping such a fundamental secret from her. They had been so close since their awakening, it could not end like this.

‘I don’t really know what to say,’ the Londoner tried to respond, stumbling over every word. ‘I don’t really know any gay people. I guess it’s not such a big thing where I come from. I read stuff in the papers about homophobic assaults and things like that...’

‘Oh, it’s so different in my time. 2005, everyone’s more accepting than they were in the Seventies. There’s a whole gay community, gay women in the church and positions of power, even celebrities are free to come out and admit what they are.’

The conversation dried up. Anna did not know whether she was trying to justify her sexuality or just make Denise understand who she was. Both women were nervously rubbing their elbows, struggling through every point of eye contact.

‘Do you...have a girlfriend, then?’

Anna sighed. It was not the question itself; there was a simple answer to that one. The tone of Denise’s voice when she said the word “girlfriend” reminded her of the first time she had heard her father ask that question. There was less disgust in Denise’s voice than Daddy used but it had the same impact.

*She sounds repulsed by the idea of two women being in love, like the notion of asking that question to a female is alien to her. If she is so disgusted by the idea, there’s nothing inside her that can make Denise feel the way I feel about her.*

‘Yeah, I did...I mean, back in New York. Her name’s Samantha. She’s...’

With Denise watching, she tried to turn her lie into a casual description.

‘...she’s blonde, couple of tattoos, bigger than me cause of the time she spends in the gym. I miss her.’

The longest pause yet followed as Anna prayed that throwing Denise off the trail would work. Nobody who knew Sam would ever describe her in that way. She was contemplating whether to turn on the tears when the English Rose finally smiled and took a step closer. One small step for her, one giant leap in getting over this difficult moment in their relationship.

‘I’m sorry, Anna. I guess I never really stopped to think that some of us could have left behind people we love. When you’re alone, you just kind of think about yourself. If you want to talk about Samantha, I’m happy to listen.’

An olive branch, under these circumstances, could not be turned away even if Anna had to sacrifice some pride to save their friendship. They continued their tense stroll through the jungle with the New Yorker resolving to never let Denise know how much the English Rose reminded her of Sam.

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Patrick twirled his pocket watch around his fingers absently, lost in his worries.

The Dorey Lester watch was new when his grandfather bought it in the 1890s and the likes of Gareth probably considered it an antique but it was precious to Patrick. Intricate gold engravings of classical, swirling patterns covered the front casing. The face of the watch, adorned with roman numerals, was sleek and polished to a fine shine.

‘A beautiful piece, Patrick.’

He glanced across at Matthew Somerset. The heavyset miner slouched against the wall beside the entrance to Base Camp having complained laying flat on the chamber bed was hurting his back. Sweat created a film of fatigue over his face. The pain in his leg must have been excruciating but he still smiled softly through the agony.

‘Aye, my grandfather’s.’

‘Must be worth a guinea or two?’

‘He was a wealthy businessman by the time he passed on. Left me all I needed for a good life but this was the greatest treasure he gave me. Apart from some good memories.’

Matthew twitched as he tried to prop himself further up against the wall. ‘Memories are worth more than any heirloom.’

‘Maybe memories are all we have now.’

Patrick hoped his softened tones would allow the conversation to trail off. He had been caught contemplating just how meaningless his pocket watch was under the current situation but what he was really thinking could not be uttered aloud.

The situation was deteriorating drastically. When he had first woken up to this nightmare, things had seemed dire but so much had changed since that day. An innocent woman was dead from the technology that could save them, wild beasts roamed the jungle and tensions among the Reminders were at breaking point.

For the first time, Patrick was contemplating that he might die on this planet.

‘Memories give me strength,’ Matthew continued, his voice straining. ‘I remember my wife, my family and they give me the strength I need to endure each day on this world.’

The coalminer winced as a sharp shot of pain leapt up his leg, the catalyst for a fit of dry coughs. The broken fibula Michael Leigh had splintered would take time to heal. Patrick waited patiently for Matthew to find his breath.

*He can't see it yet, he thought reluctantly. His memories could not prevent his accident and the recollections of his family can not fix his leg. What hope is there for any of us?*

He glanced towards Gareth tending to the eerily silent schoolgirl in Bryony's lap. The teacher tried his best to provide hope to the group. Even when Patrick had confessed about losing Michael's gun, his reaction had been sympathetic and reassuring where they did not deserve to be. His words were always well placed while his actions in burying Emily and the Chinaman had raised spirits briefly.

Patrick was the only one who could see the truth behind his words.

*Gareth can not do it alone.*

The technology that might save them seemed only capable of killing them. The surroundings that provided food and water also harboured savage animals. That blessed luck that had sailed Patrick through life was

ineffective under two suns. The normally jolly Scot felt as useful and in control of his own destiny as his grandfather's pocket watch.

‘Hey!’

Both men looked up at the sharp voice that burst into Base Camp a moment before Christopher Veroni. In his hand was a small glass jar filled with green liquid, a jar he held up for the whole room to see. With Sara Langley behind him, the music producer glared venomously across the room and fixed Gareth with an angry glare.

‘Care to explain what this is, sunshine?’



## nineteen

As soon as Christopher Veroni burst into Base Camp, Gareth immediately felt the atmosphere intensify. Most of the abductees were scattered around the room – Patrick was chatting with Matthew near the door, Bryony was trying futilely to start a conversation with Claire and most of the others were rummaging through the pile of clothes – but everyone looked up at once.

When Gareth realised what the music producer was holding aloft, he felt his stomach shrivel.

*There it is, Gaz; proof of what an idiot you are. You kept that room a secret and now somebody has discovered it before you could make an announcement. I don't have to guess where this is going...*

Before he could put his explanation across, Christopher began talking loudly to capture the attention of the room.

'I bet you discovered that hidden room in one of the smaller labs some time ago and decided to keep it your little secret. I'd say you wanted to keep us all in the dark like you did about that computer room. And your burial plans. Any other little secrets you want to come clean about?'

Gareth suddenly felt the eyes of everyone honing in on him and was conscious of a bead of sweat dancing on his upper lip. 'It's not...'

'Seeing as how we all put our trust in you when you wanted to keep looking for a way home in this facility, I'd say this is proof of you letting us down. What else aren't you telling us?'

That stopped any thoughts of defending himself. The idea of letting these people down was troubling enough but having it declared to the whole group so viciously rocked Gareth.

*Because he's right, the snide voice had found its power again. As soon as you started lying to people, Gaz, you lost any chance of gaining their respect.*

Christopher pushed on. 'How can we have faith that you're making the right decisions for us if you don't give us a say in any decision? Like when you said we couldn't use the alien technology to find our way home. When did this group become a dictatorship, huh?'

Bryony valiantly tried to step forward to defend him. 'Christopher...'

'You can't defend him on this, Bryony. That little speech by the graves just papered over the cracks of how seriously screwed up this situation is and so far, he's done nothing to make any of it right. He tells us we can't even investigate the technology that brought us here, he persuades us not to leave the facility and he hides a room filled with things that could save us. All decisions *he* made for us.'

Bryony opened her mouth but she had no words to counter that argument. Gareth placed a hand on her shoulder but her instinct was to recoil.

*Even she's losing faith in you, Gaz. Maybe the woman who claimed all that was needed to survive was faith is losing hers. How can you convince this angry Cockney of your intentions if you can't even get through to Bryony?*

Christopher evidently noticed the tension between them as well as the fact that nobody was leaping to his defence. 'Maybe we need a new direction. Maybe we need to be making decisions as a group for a change.'

Gareth found himself on the edge of a choice, the brink of a crucial decision. How he would react to this challenge might influence the destiny of the group. A simple choice; stand up for himself or yield to the stronger man.

*Like what happened with Simon Grady? The marine challenged you and half the group walked out on their only chance of getting home. Your weakness won through, Gaz. Just like when your subconscious lost out to those so-called premonitions. Soon everybody will be railroaded down a path that leads them away from salvation.*

*I can't let that happen.*

As his doubts distracted him, Gareth allowed Christopher the opportunity to direct his rehearsed tirade towards the whole group.

'Let's face facts; we've been here for days and we're no closer to getting home. We need to get organised, figure out the next move. It sure



beats praying for miracles and waiting for the next one of us to die, right?’

The others just stared back without making any effort to disagree. Their doubts and fears were being voiced by the suave Cockney and nobody had the strength to fight them.

‘I say we start by going through that room you’ve been hiding from us to find anything we can use to survive here.’

‘We already have.’

Everyone looked up as Anna and Denise returned to Base Camp. However long they had stood in the archway listening to the debate, Anna had obviously heard enough to find a voice to stand up for Gareth (which was more than he had done for himself). She strode into the thick of the group and positioned herself at his side.

‘When Gareth found the storage room, he knew there could be dangerous things in there. He asked me to check it out before telling everyone and I think he made the right call. That jar is proof enough that what’s in that room could be very bad for us.’

‘That’s my point, Anna,’ Christopher did not sound phased, ‘something like that could be a vital clue to figuring out a few things and he kept it from us.’

‘He’s just not had chance to do anything about it. Besides, Gareth’s only ever had our best interests at heart.’

‘And what about Emily?’

The room fell silent and Gareth felt Bryony shiver at his side. With anger suddenly boiling his blood, he stepped forward and finally found his voice.

‘Emily’s death was a tragedy and the reason I didn’t tell anyone about the storage room straight away was because I didn’t want another tragedy. We weren’t sure what was in there and Anna was checking to make sure things were safe. What if there had been a strange alien weapon of some kind that could have killed us all?’

This time it was Christopher’s turn to be lost for words. Gareth continued resolutely.

‘I never said survival here would be easy but I only want to reduce the risks. If you’re pissed at me for that, go ahead but I’d do it all again. It may take a while but we’ll find the way home without losing any more people, I swear.’

‘Hollow words,’ Christopher replied, stepping right up to his face, ‘when what we need is results.’

‘What we need is patience, Chris. The answers are in this building but we need to go carefully.’

‘Who says the answers are here?’ Sara suddenly piped in, positioning herself beside Christopher. ‘The others went into the jungle looking for the way home, maybe we should too.’

‘We’ve been through this,’ Bryony replied, positioning herself beside Gareth. ‘We decided to stay here because we believed the answers are in Carbonek not in the wild jungle. We made our decision as a group, we’re staying here!’

‘But it’s not too late to change our minds, we can still save ourselves...’ Sara started before the man she seemed determined to defend interrupted her.

‘It doesn’t matter if we stay or go, what matters is that we begin making decisions as a group not by one individual who thinks he has control over us. We should have all been consulted on the storage room, we should all be involved in the debates and decisions. You’re not the man, you know.’

He punctuated that last sentence with a finger jabbed into Gareth’s shoulder.

Anger swarmed through Gareth and he flapped the rogue finger aside before he knew what he was doing. The music producer responded to the flap with a shove before the teacher replied with a shove of his own.

The room suddenly exploded in noise and rage as the two men became entangled, their respective emotions giving a sour sting to their expressions. Fists flew, motions blurred as Patrick and Michael leapt forward to part the two men before any serious blows could connect.

Christopher was practically spitting as the Scot held him back. ‘You’re not fit to lead this group, Gareth.’

For the first time since the Explorers left, Gareth’s position as unofficial leader was officially in dispute. He had never wanted that responsibility but as their gazes were locked, he was overwhelmed with a strong desire to fight for it because his instincts persuaded him that relinquishing that position to Christopher Veroni was a bad idea.

The tension was shattered by the least likely member of the group.

The Russian lifted her arm slowly towards both men. In her hand, she held the missing service revolver Patrick had reported lost on the slope of the volcano. After the spike in activity, the room fell suddenly silent again.

‘Tanya,’ Gareth started, that serene calmness returning to his voice, ‘put the gun down. We can discuss this rationally, yeah? There’s no need for violence.’

‘It is not for you, Gareth...’

In her husky voice, the words echoed around the room. Christopher began shaking but Gareth frowned as he followed the line the weapon was pointing.

Straight at Sara Langley.

‘...it is for the alien.’



## twenty

Base Camp had not been so still since before the abductees had awoken from their enforced slumber. The Reminders were mostly gathered near the alien tables while Matthew watched from his propped position beside the archway. There were four people at the centre of the group nervously forming an encompassing circle.

Tanya stood firmly with the loaded weapon aimed and ready to fire. Christopher stood dumbstruck into silence. Gareth stood between them, a steady hand held up in a calming gesture. The fourth individual was motionless in the line of fire.

‘W-what are you talking about?’ Sara stammered through the confused expression on her face. ‘I ain’t no damn alien.’

‘Tanya,’ Gareth interjected as calmly as he could, ‘just relax for a sec, okay.’

‘This is an alien, Gareth. It is using this body to manipulate us from first day.’

Christopher almost shrieked in shock. ‘You insane? I mean, are you tripping, darling?’

*This could get out of hand quickly,* Gareth realised, thinking back to the time Sergeant Grady had pulled a weapon on him.

‘Okay, Tanya,’ he tried a different approach, ‘just tell me what you’re thinking.’

Sara balked. ‘You can’t listen to her, crazy bitch’s holding a gun.’

‘I know this girl was different,’ Tanya began without taking her gaze from the teenager, ‘but I think something wrong when I see tracks in the path outside first laboratory. The day we woke, yes?’

Gareth searched for the memory of the Russian kneeling in the dirt just after they had escaped from the first laboratory a week ago. ‘Tracks. You mean before we even entered the passage?’

‘Shoe prints leading into room. Someone had entered before we left it.’

‘S-so,’ Sara interjected in seemingly-genuine fear, ‘could’ve been anybody from that first lab.’

‘That is why I check shoes of everyone in group. Quietly. I look at her shoes when she was sleep on side of mountain. Same size, same...pattern. But I do not know why she lies.’

Gareth glanced across at the young American in the sights of Michael Leigh’s service revolver. She looked afraid, confused and especially human.

‘She wants us to leave this place. She try when the group split, she try on mountain, she try again now...and I think she has been using Christopher to that end.’

Tanya’s eyes flickered towards the dumbstruck music producer. Gareth seemed to register emotions in her eyes; it looked like a blue-tinted tinge of sympathy.

His mind raced with the overload of information. His logical reflexes usually had to deal with posers from his pupils not questions about the eligibility of a person’s claim to being human. Sara had done nothing suspicious as far as he could remember.

‘None of that means she’s an alien, Tanya,’ he sighed softly, ‘she could just be a frightened girl wanting to go home. I don’t know about the footprints but...’

‘There’s more. When beast attacked us, she fell running. It should have killed her but it left her. It...ignores her. Why would it leave her and chase us? Unless beast knows she is alien.’

*That still doesn’t sound like her ace card, does it?*

‘Circumstantial,’ he said with a hint of remorse, ‘and it doesn’t mean she’s an alien, does it?’

This time her pause was longer. It was obvious she was struggling with something, a truth she did not want to admit. The room held its breath and sweat lined a few brows.

*There is something more, isn’t there? Look at her eyes, Gaz, she’s fighting something.*

She strengthened her grip and her gaze with a stern resolution. ‘I see colours.’

While half the group frowned in confusion – perhaps trying to follow the Russian’s fragmented English – Sara Langley chose that exact moment to spin on her heels and spring towards the exit.

‘Noooo!’ Christopher leapt directly into the line of fire. Tanya was a fraction of a second from pulling the trigger but stopped at the last possible moment.

‘Stop her,’ Gareth yelled, suddenly caught up in the swirl of confusion. He did not understand why Sara wanted to run, the significance of Tanya’s confusing statement or why Christopher would risk his life to save the teenager. He was overwhelmed by a sudden sense of panic rising above the surface of his confusion.

Without understanding why, he believed she should be stopped.

Sara sprinted towards the door, desperation in the glance over her shoulder. The Russian tried pursuing but Christopher blocked her path. Patrick yelled something lost behind the sharp intake of half a dozen breaths while Gareth’s feet stuck steadfastly to the floor.

Just as Sara reached the archway, something flew threw the air.

Matthew Somerset had somehow managed to pivot onto his one good leg and propel himself upwards. It was just enough to give him the spring he needed to catch the girl by the waist but too powerful for him to control his momentum. They collided awkwardly and flew into the wall with a sickening thud.

Their bodies rotated in midair and Gareth watched the broken leg twist sickeningly beneath Matthew’s body as they landed in a heap.

The coalminer screamed in agony, a shrill yell that echoed around the building eclipsing Sara’s stunned grunt. He lay on top of her more by accident than intent. Some of the others raced forward, a few (like Tanya) to stop her and a few (like Michael) to help him.

‘Get off me!’

Sara started shrieking as Tanya lifted the teenager to her feet, pinned her arm behind her back and pushed her against the nearest chamber. The Russian moved with practiced ease to restrain the teenager. The others watched dumbstruck as she raised the weapon to Sara’s temple and cocked the trigger.

*‘Не сделать меня убийство вы,’* Tanya murmured menacingly in her native tongue, a threat she seemed willing to follow through with even if it was not understood by its intended target.

‘Tanya?’ Gareth edged forward, conscious of how much room the others were allowing for this encounter. He could no longer determine

how his voice sounded because everything seemed suddenly misty to him. The whole world had flipped upside down in three minutes.

The Russian bit her lip before looking up at him, eyes burning through the matted strands of blonde hair that shielded her face. 'Let me tie her and I will explain.'

Her voice sounded calm, even rational. He paused as he considered her request.

With a deep sigh, he crossed towards the pile of clothes, rummaged through the assorted attire and found a brown leather belt. It felt heavy in his hands as he returned to the group.

Patrick grabbed his arm and met his eyes with a pleading gaze. 'Gareth, don't do this.'

'Not now, Pat,' he whispered, not sure what response his eyes gave as he stepped out of the grip and sidled up to the teenage American he remembered crying when he had freed her.

'Just stay still and let me sort this out,' he whispered in Sara's ear before taking the twisted arm from Tanya and tying the wrist to its counterpart.

*I can't believe you're actually doing this, Gaz. What's this poor girl done to deserve this treatment? If you ask me, the Ruskie's lost her marbles.*

He made sure his knot was tight even as he felt Tanya inspecting his work while he finished. She held her aim for what seemed like an age as everyone in the group – maybe even Tanya herself – wondered what would happen next. Finally, she lowered the gun.

'I am not...crazy,' she searched her limited English vocabulary for the word skipping through Gareth's head.

'Fair do's but I'd still like an explanation and it'd better be a good one.'

'I am seeing colours for three days. Bright colours. On your heads, all of you.'

The only movement in the room was a mixture of awkward frowning and shuffling feet.

'They are like...mist, clouds, yes? They follow you, they are you.' She nodded hesitantly at Gareth. 'You are dark green.'

He tried a smile that felt feeble on his face. 'My favourite colour.'

Tanya returned a smile that carried an emotional mixture of sympathy and patience. 'When Emily died, her colour was gone.'



‘Like some sort of life force?’

*Do you realise what you just said, you muppet? Life force? Coloured mists dangling around your head? The woman is mental, Gaz. She’s gone nutski.*

The Russian pointed the pistol casually at Sara. ‘She has no colours, no mist.’

‘What does any of that prove?’ Sara growled, fury penetrating every word. ‘Only that you’re insane.’

‘I know then you are different but I did not know why. The tracks, your shoes, your need to leave this place; you must have different needs. An...agenda.’

‘She’s lying!’

Gareth stepped forward so that he caught the teenager’s gaze. ‘Then can you explain why your footprints were in the ground before we left the first laboratory?’

Sara fell silent and her gaze lingered on his. In that moment of hesitation, he noticed something in her eyes. It reminded him of one of the kids in his class, Ethan; the boy had been raised by a liar and whenever his deceptions were uncovered, he had the same lost look in his eyes. The rabbit-in-the-headlights look of a deceiver uncovered.

With a heavy feeling in his heart, he sighed. ‘Stay there until I figure out what to do with you.’

Gareth turned away as her jaw dropped, words failing. He went to help Matthew, leaving Tanya with the weapon to watch over the teenager bound by a leather belt.



## twenty-one

Christopher slumped to the ground near the dusty dais edging the canyon outside Carbonek. His knees jarred in the dirt but he felt nothing.

As his arms flopped at his side, his fingers grazed the ground, tender skin meeting cold grit. He felt nothing.

The afternoon was fading from magnificence as one savage sun chased the other across the sky. Warm air caressed the jungle, tickling the limbs of the mismatched trees as the roaring waterfall that descended the depths of the chasm bounced off weathered walls. The scene blended a perfect blue sky with the spectrum of green nature provided and gave the result an effervescent glow worthy of a master's canvass.

Still he felt nothing.

Christopher knelt in the dirt and attempted to process everything that had just happened.

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Bryony felt physically sick. The humidity in Base Camp had not cooled even though evening was drawing upon the world outside but that did not play a significant part in how she felt. There were so many factors to this sensation.

The one in front of her was particularly poignant.

'Don't worry, okay. We're all here for you.'

Her voice had taken on that refined Californian tone again. She had picked it up from various studio bosses, directors and moneymen who formed the backbone of the industry that thrust her beneath the spotlight of fame. It had been a world far from the life she knew, forced

on her without warning. It had introduced her to unbelievable perils that threatened her sanity despite their beauty and mystique.

*Just like this place*, she mused sullenly.

‘Stand back, Bryony.’

Bryony did as asked. She always did. Always had. Whatever her mother asked, whatever Oscar Whyte asked, whatever her scumbag boyfriend asked. The First Dame of the Silver Screen was a frightened little sheep herded against her will.

‘On the count of three...’

Gareth was smiling even as sweat trickled down his face. In fairness, he had never made Bryony feel like he was ordering her around. His words, his smile, his reassurances were consistently driven by compassion rather than a commandment. This time, his compassion was not directed at her.

The giant Welsh coalminer was soaked with sweat as his body burned. Michael knelt on the opposite side of his legs to Gareth and Patrick braced his broad shoulders against a bundled jumper whilst Anna and Denise clasped one giant hand each.

They were all united as...

‘One...’

Matthew’s features strained as his left leg, first broken in the fall from the engine room bridge, was carefully hoisted onto Gareth’s shoulder. Michael gingerly clasped the top of the knee and braced himself. The snapped bone sticking out of Matthew’s shin, which created a sickening lump in his leg, was making Bryony nauseous. Glancing around the faces of the others, she could tell they felt the same way...

‘Two...’

With a sly nod from Gareth, Michael closed his eyes and slammed down on the shinbone with all his weight. The bone snapped back into place with a crisp crack before Matthew howled in agony.

His scream filled all of Carbonek, a cry of pain unlike anything Bryony had ever heard. Her eyes snapped shut to hide the scene when she opened them again, Matthew had lost consciousness and the young medic was frantically bandaging the broken leg to a splint.

‘P-please, please...’

Gareth, still holding the leg in mid-air, spoke with eerie serenity. ‘Take your time, mate. Don’t rush.’

*How does he do it?* Bryony thought. *He keeps his composure under these incredible situations without even looking like he's bothered by any of it. No wonder we all accepted him as our leader.*

With the others watching – apart from Tanya who remained guarding the bound Sara – Michael proceeded to set a splint with firewood from the jungle. His young hands worked quickly, shaking as he strapped up the injured limb.

‘There,’ he sighed as he finished and gently lowered the leg.

‘Nice one, mate,’ the teacher congratulated him with a clap on the back.

‘I just h-h-hope the break s-sets. It was probably only f-f-fractured before he f-fell but there could be some serious damage in th-there. I’m just a medic, I can’t operate w-w-with...’

He winced as Gareth’s grip moved to his shoulder and pinched it hard, snapping him out of his anxiety. ‘Let’s just see how he does. Don’t worry, Matthew’s a fighter.’

Michael nodded, unsuccessfully tried returning the smile then stood up to wander away in a daze.

Bryony watched the others leave as pale as the brave young medic. Gareth stayed to tuck a travel blanket – liberated from the suitcase discovered in the storage room – around the coalminer’s shoulders. When he stood, their eyes met for what seemed like the first time in days. Old friends reunited under difficult circumstances.

‘You okay?’ There was still genuine concern in his voice but numbed by weariness.

‘You stole my question.’

He paused before dropping his gaze. Memories of their tense argument when they had searched the bodies in the other laboratory resurfaced; he had been stressed by the pressures of leading the group and snapped at her in fatigued frustration. This time, he retained his composure with a soft smile.

‘It’s been an interesting day.’

‘Yeah, that’s not an understatement at all,’ she laughed, conscious of how her old accent melted back into her strained voice.

He glanced across the room at the pacing Russian and the silent American who glared at each other with a Cold War loathing felt all around the camp. Their stand off had been a stalemate while everyone tended to the critically injured coalminer.

‘What do you think about Tanya’s claim, Bry?’

She shrugged, taking an age to find any words. ‘I guess...it’s possible.’

‘We need more than “possible” right now. Tanya sounds like she’s in control but the way she reacted, I’m afraid she’s going to put a bullet in that girl’s head. Does any of it sound plausible?’

‘Coloured mists circling our heads, a visible life force only she can see, Sara’s really an alien trying to trick us all into leaving Carbonek?’

He chuckled softly. ‘Yeah, sounds crazy.’

‘Well, is it any crazier than us all being abducted from different points in time and left to die in this facility somewhere on a jungle world beneath two suns?’

‘Marginally.’

‘Then what if it’s true?’

Bryony could not believe she was even entertaining the idea of some strange entity taking the place of a teenage girl from Boston and fooling them all for days. It sounded like an outlandish Jules Verne tale, a yarn as far beyond belief as the whole abduction. That surely made it just as likely to be possible.

‘I can’t explain the footprints or why the beast in the jungle let her go,’ he sighed, frustration replacing his composure. ‘Patrick thought it was strange too but that doesn’t mean she’s an alien. So she really wants to leave Carbonek for some reason; doesn’t mean she’s got any sinister motives.’

‘If she was so desperate to leave, why did she stay when the Explorers left?’

‘Come on, Bryony, if we start giving into paranoia then none of us are going to survive this.’

‘I know, I know...but what if she is an alien?’

Gareth wiped sweat from his unkempt stubble. ‘If it’s true...’

When he trailed off, Bryony noticed doubt in his eyes. It was something he had lived with since the beginning of this nightmare, something that tested his unwanted position as leader of the group. She could only sympathise with his position.

‘We still don’t know why these aliens took us and if it was part of some plot or scheme then she could represent a risk to the group. My gut’s telling me something’s not right. I have to protect the group first...protect you. If she is a threat, we *have to* take care of it.’

Even though Gareth kept his voice low, the potency of the suggestion gave them both a start and he glanced around afraid of someone overhearing him and getting the wrong impression. It was a dark thought verbalised in dark tones. The group were clustered nearby; nobody gave any indication they had overheard.

Bryony clasped his arm and pulled him further away from the others. 'Are you saying what I think you're saying?'

Gareth's eyes sparkled but they did not linger on hers. 'What I meant was...look, I'll try talking to both of them but for now it's best if we keep Sara secured until we can prove or disprove Tanya's theory. If it's true, we'll figure out what to do next.'

He managed to fix her eyes again before turning back to the group.

Bryony watched him walk away with worries surfacing in her mind. That last look gave her more concern than any of the doubts or decisions he had expressed previously. Any sympathy for his difficult position bled away as she considered what was going through his mind.

*He knows where this is going, dear,* her mother's voice whispered in her ear. *That young man realises that keeping alive an alien spy in your midst is a dangerous game. In the long term, killing that girl may be your only chance for survival...and he knows he has to be the one to do it.*

Bryony felt her mother's cold breath filtered through a sneering grin on the nape of her neck. When she turned around, there was nothing there but the wide expanse of the laboratory filled with a lingering air of dread.





## twenty-two

Firelight frolicked across the cream-coloured curvature of the Base Camp ceiling. The group had taken an age to settle after Anna grudgingly organised a solemn dusk-lit forage for firewood. Haunted by the beast that had stolen into the facility, the group took the unanimous decision to close the laboratory door and set a fire in its path.

It was the only decision of the night and Gareth stayed as far away from it as possible.

He squirmed on his chamber mattress, hands tucked behind his head, staring up at the curved ceiling. Sounds of slumber filled the room as he contemplated.

So much had happened so quickly over the past few days. The discovery of hidden rooms, the near-eruption of a volcano, the crawl through the catacombs, the attack by the beast, the death of Emily Wade, the injury to Matthew...

*Now add the accusation that one of the group might be an undercover alien and that makes for a top quality couple of days, doesn't it? At the least, one really rotten run of luck.*

And they were still nowhere near finding the way home. All this drama with no significant progress.

*So what? Are you going to lay the blame on a teenage girl accused of being an alien or are you going to stand up and accept the blame yourself? Maybe Christopher was right to call you out because you have kept secrets and you have misled the group. Not qualities befitting a leader, huh?*

*Maybe but that doesn't answer the question Tanya's raised about Sara.*

*What was the question again? Oh right...is this girl really an imposter who has manipulated the group from the beginning with some unknown agenda to force everyone to leave the facility?*

It sounded ridiculous even when the crazed voice inside his head replayed it to him. Sara was just a kid. He had freed her from the chamber dome himself and had not heard anything negative about the girl from anyone. Apart from voicing a strong desire to leave Carbonek, she had not done anything out of the ordinary at all.

Was she really a threat?

Gareth turned on his side, settling in for an endless night contemplating what to do with Sara Langley.

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When Bryony woke up, there was a bustle of activity around the laboratory but only one person caught her eye as she returned to consciousness.

Most of the group had clustered around the chamber bed where Matthew Somerset had spent an uncomfortable night (waking her up with his screaming twice). Tanya, looking exhausted, had not even let go of the gun while Sara was curled up and snoring sweetly. Exhausted Gareth was still asleep across the room with one arm hanging limply off his bed.

The person who caught her attention still slumbered in her arms.

*What would Mom say if she saw this,* she sighed as her grasp tightened around Claire Stewart's scrunched frame. *You, the motherly type?*

They were curled up on the floor in the far corner of the laboratory together, shielded from the others. The poor girl had not uttered a single word as Bryony led her away from the others and set-up a makeshift bed for two. It was because of the girl's sudden inability to speak normally that she had taken it upon herself to act as interim guardian and protector.

*With a role model like my mother, it's a wonder I even noticed...*

She bit her tongue, afraid that the vision of her mother would return to haunt her. It had been plaguing her for two days, testing her nerves like a good figment of the imagination should. Whatever trauma she had suffered upon discovering the underground engine room had snapped her psyche and she simply could not afford to lose her sanity with someone to depend on her.

Claire stirred in her arms but sleep was still clinging to her.

‘Claire, honey?’

The poor girl did not even open her eyes as she stirred. ‘It’s okay...he’s coming...it’s okay.’

Bryony smiled as Claire drifted back to sleep, evidently still caught in a dream the scarred child could not escape. She carefully manoeuvred from beneath her and stretched the weariness from her limbs.

Yesterday had been so tense that the aftertaste still lingered around Base Camp like a stale breath. Apart from the fuss around Matthew, everyone else seemed caught in a daze. For the first time since the departure of the Explorers, the group was filled with a sense of disorientation and despair.

‘I don’t blame them.’

Bryony closed her eyes as she felt Mary-Anne James’ presence over her shoulder. ‘Not now.’

‘You can see it in their eyes,’ her mother pushed onwards, ‘they’re frightened. They don’t have a clue what’s happening and not even the Lord can save them, never mind a teacher who’s out of his depth.’

There was a pause and she could picture her mother taking a deep inhale from a cheap cigarette.

‘I don’t know whether that girl’s a Martian or not but it’s the not knowing that’s killing them. Maybe it’ll take the Russian putting a bullet in her head to put everyone at ease.’

‘Gareth won’t let her,’ Bryony hissed, suddenly very aware that she was talking to a breakdown of her subconscious.

‘Unless Gareth tells her to do it.’

‘He won’t...’

Her voice trailed off as she lost the words to defend him. Christopher’s tirade the day before had rocked everyone’s faith in the Welsh teacher but Bryony could see more. Gareth was not a killer but that look in his eyes the previous night had been enough to form doubts of her own; maybe he was thinking about it.

‘Just go away. I never wanted you in my life before and I don’t want you here. I ran to get away from you now leave me alone!’

Bryony almost spat the last few words in an attempt to keep her voice low but when she opened her eyes again, there was no sign of her mother or any other apparition. Nobody seemed to have noticed her crazed conversation with herself.

Sighing, she gave Claire one last check before crossing the room. She hesitated as she considered waking Gareth up before heading towards the group gathered around Matthew. It seemed like the less troublesome of the two options.

‘Everything all right?’

Of the twelve remaining Remainders, five held vigil around the limp, sweat-encased body of Matthew Somerset. Anna and Denise stood near his head, Michael was checking his pulse with Juliette staring wide-eyed at Bryony from his side. Patrick had his head cupped in his hands before glancing up with a weary expression.

‘Good, you’re here,’ he sighed, ‘we were just about to wake the others.’

‘Why, what’s wrong?’

Patrick glanced at Michael who looked like he had not slept at all. The medic placed Matthew’s arm gently at his side before fixing Bryony’s eyes.

‘I think there’s a ruptured artery in his leg. There’s swelling around the wound. It-it-it may be from when we set the break. If we don’t get inside and repair the damage, Matthew will die.’

Bryony’s face lost all colour.

Nobody could claim that their situation had been fraught with good fortune; every day on this world had been one messed-up nightmare after another. Throughout the course of their stay in Carbonek, one man had been the consistent beacon of optimism. Matthew’s greatest strength had been emotional, not physical. The gently spoken giant, of all the abductees, was the last person who deserved to suffer this latest tragedy.

‘Bryony?’ Anna tried to catch her attention, causing Bryony to realise she had been shocked silent.

Clearing her throat, she quickly regained strength and composure. ‘Have you told Gareth yet?’

A few nervously-exchanged glances before Michael answered in a low, cold voice. ‘We thought you’d be better at breaking the news.’

The young medic’s gaze said more than his words; the group were starting to lose some of their comfort around Gareth Oakley. Since the Explorers had left, his leadership had stuttered slowly towards a situation nobody wanted. Inactivity. Doing nothing was the one option nobody was content with but it was looking increasingly like the only course the group were destined to take.

Because of that, even the likes of Michael were beginning to feel awkward around him.

‘I’ll do just that.’

Sounding more confident than she had ever felt, she strode purposefully across the laboratory to wake up their leader.

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Patrick watched Bryony leave and felt sorry for the poor girl.

*She’s been as innocent a victim as any of us, he thought serenely, only she’s felt closer to Gareth than any of us. He saved her first, he was there for her when she needed someone. If she loses faith in the lad, we’ll all begin to fall.*

‘*Spectres.*’

Everyone surrounding the broken body of Matthew Somerset turned to Juliette Maitland, the pretty young French girl who had been cowering in constant fear since the incident that ended Emily Wade’s life. She was watching Bryony leave, her hand raised so that a single finger traced her path.

‘*Cette femme voit des spectres.*’

Patrick frowned. ‘Michael, what she’s saying?’

‘I think...’ The medic trailed off.

‘What?’

‘She said that Bryony...sees ghosts.’



## twenty-three

Anna felt memories of her father flitting casually across her mind as she stood beside Matthew Somerset's pale body.

Until the day she came out to her parents, Anna had adored her father. He had not only been the breadwinner and single male role model in the family, as a doctor he represented a moral equivalent of magnetic north. Strong family values, an unending source of knowledge and as a surgeon, he came home every night with stories that both disturbed and fascinated her.

This day was about to become one of those stories destined to haunt her.

‘Are you s-s-sure you can do this?’ Michael asked her again.

‘No,’ she answered again, ‘but you don’t have many choices, do you? Not unless someone here used to be a real nurse in a previous life.’

With a sigh, the medic – who was hardly a qualified surgeon of twenty-first century standards himself – nodded before turning to Denise and holding up his hands, palms down. The English Rose had filled a couple of empty glass containers from the storage room with fresh stream water. With a nod from Michael, she dripped cool water over his hands to clean them ready for surgery.

The poor kid had been more nervous than usual since informing Gareth about the need to operate. Anna could not imagine what kind of training he underwent for triage work in the First World War but she guessed it was insufficient for an operation of this complexity. Her father studied for years at the Pritzker School of Medicine in Chicago to become a successful surgeon; Michael was still only nineteen.

When he turned back to her, Anna could see the anxiety shimmering in his eyes.

‘Michael...close your eyes.’

He frowned. ‘W-what?’

‘Just do it for me. Before we start, yeah?’

He hesitated before following orders. A flinch or two followed, signs he was still anxious.

‘You’re standing on a beach,’ she whispered softly, ‘with warm sand between your toes and sunlight glinting off the sea. A cool breeze surrounds you, calming your skin. The waves are crashing softly against the shore, in and out, in and out. You feel at peace with the world as you breathe in the salty air through your nose and feel it nestle in the pit of your stomach.’

She stepped closer and lowered her voice so nobody else could hear what she was saying.

‘Breathe it in...then out. In...then out. Hold the breath in...then let it out through your mouth.’

With Base Camp silent, the young medic followed her instructions precisely, stomach contracting with every profound inhale. She fell silent and waited for him to open his eyes.

It was an old trick learned during college back when she had actually wanted to follow her father’s path into medicine and chosen a career in psychotherapy. Though her path had changed considerably since those days, she had never forgotten the important lessons she learnt on that course.

Michael slowly opened his eyes and smiled softly before whispering, ‘Thank you.’

Smiling back, she patted him softly on the shoulder before allowing him to return to his patient.

Matthew was sprawled on a chamber bed with his shirt off and his left trouser leg ripped open up to the knee. There was an unsightly purple bruise below the knee where the bone had been sticking out. The artery inside his leg was slowly pouring blood into the broken limb like a leaky gas pipe ready to explode.

The coalminer’s time was running out.

‘Do we have to operate, Michael?’ Denise asked from her position a few feet from the makeshift operating table, her voice wavering at the prospect.

If he could have found another way out of it, Anna was sure Michael would have taken it. The medic looked as pale as a tired ghost, his hands dripping slowly dry.



‘I h-have to. The break must have r-ruptured a leg artery and if it’s not healing on its own, there could be a-a-a bone fragment lodged in the artery. If it doesn’t heal, the inside of the leg could get infected and he’d die a very p-painful death.’

‘Some scientists think that’s how Tutankhamen died,’ Anna added anecdotally.

Denise’s mouth gaped. ‘This isn’t a joke, Anna. Matthew could die.’

‘It’s not a joke, Denise. And don’t think I’m not as concerned about Matt as anyone here.’

A moment of tension lingered between the two women. Stakes were high, lives were on the line but Anna could not tear her gaze from the English Rose. Things had not been right between them since the storage room and the anxiety had only escalated from that accidental confession.

*She is really struggling with my secret even though I was so sympathetic about hers and me being gay doesn’t even compare with the whole “my boss touched me up and made me his secret office whore” routine. Maybe I don’t know her as well as I would like, maybe Denise is more complex than my rose-tinted view of her, maybe I’ve let my hormones affect my instincts again.*

*Or maybe we’re both just victims of guilty, ignorant men.*

‘Hey.’

All three jumped as Bryony arrived behind them, frowning at the strained expressions on the two assistant nurses. Anna felt her cheeks burning as she realised that her hormones were fuelling another sensation; anger. Anger at Denise’s response to what should have been an incident bringing them closer.

‘Are we ready?’ Bryony asked firmly, directing the question at Michael.

‘I-I-I think so, Bryony.’

‘You don’t sound ready, Michael. Are you sure you can do this?’

Michael’s eyes dropped at the probing question. As well as sounding forthright, Bryony seemed agitated as though something was playing heavily on her mind. The glamorous woman, who was usually so sweet and innocent, had an intensity that made her intimidation of the meek teenager increase tenfold.

‘I-I-I...’

‘We’re ready.’

Anna and Denise looked at each other for a few seconds before realising that they had spoken at the exact same time. It was uncanny and even Bryony was taken aback by their sudden unity. Michael broke the silence, suddenly finding enough strength in his voice to stand up for himself.

‘We’re prepared but it may already be too late. Matthew’s growing weaker by the minute and if I can’t repair the damage before he loses too much blood, he’ll die.’

The aggression disappeared from Bryony’s eyes, replaced by a cold, empty stare into nothing. She nodded slowly, clearing her voice of any weakness before she replied. ‘I’ll let Gareth know. Good luck.’

She walked away in the direction of the exit. The rest of the Remainers had tactfully decided to leave Base Camp for the operation. The only people left were the makeshift medical team, a sleeping Claire Stewart and the anxious French woman who watched Bryony’s departure from a safe distance. Anna could see fear in Juliette’s eyes from across the room.

*I wonder what the chick meant when she said Bryony sees ghosts. Seems a rather quirky thing to say but I suppose if we’ve got a psychotic Russian claiming to see colourful mists emanating from our heads, nothing should be taken for granted.*

‘Should we get s-started?’

Anna shook the distraction from her head and avoided eye contact with Denise. With a final few deep breaths, the medic – armed with limited knowledge handed down hurriedly by the Royal Army Medical Corps – picked up his scalpel.

‘Michael?’

Everyone looked across at Matthew as though they had forgotten he was even there. His pale complexion shined under a film of sweat like moonlight reflecting off a still lake. It had been his choice to have his arms and one good leg strapped to the chamber using a variety of spare clothes. Knowing his own strength, he did not want to create complications for an operation that was his only chance of survival.

‘Yes, Matthew.’

‘Whatever happens...’ he lost his voice for a moment, swallowed hard and pushed the last words out, ‘...thanks for trying.’

Michael’s lip quivered as his hand hovered above the coalminer’s shoulder before he thought better of making a tender touch of reassurance. ‘I’m s-sorry I don’t have anaesthetic, Matt. I’ll be as quick

as I can but if you feel like you're losing consciousness, trust me, it's best to just fall asleep until it's done.'

Anna had to fight back a flood of tears. She knew as well as Michael that if the poor Welshman fell asleep, he may never wake up again.

'No...problems,' came the strained reply that echoed Gareth's calming words.

Anna turned straight into Michael's eyes and for an instant; they both knew what each other was thinking. Hopelessness was an easy emotion to read under such circumstances. The moment passed and the medic raised his scalpel ready for action.



## twenty-four

When Patrick Barrie arrived at the strange little room affectionately known as “the cupboard”, he found Tanya sitting on the only chamber that had been discovered open, picking at the burnt hole in her suit jacket. She looked exhausted, heavy eyes circled by shallow brown bags of fatigue.

‘You all right, dear?’ he asked, sympathy filling his voice.

The Russian nodded wearily. ‘*Dah*, I am fine. I am just now thinking maybe this chamber was where alien comes from. It was only one open before we wake.’

The arch leading into the cupboard had gone. If he did not know that the curved leather wall was hiding a domed enclosure, Patrick would have been convinced she was alone. ‘How is our prisoner?’

Patrick watched the Russian sigh deeply. ‘Quiet. Anna says this door can not open from inside so she is not going any place.’

‘Well then,’ he smiled, crossing the room to stand beside her, ‘I guess that means you can take a break.’

‘Thank you but...’

‘No “buts”, dear. You’ve been watching this girl for a day now without even a comfort break. I can watch a closed door for a while. At least go get yourself something to eat.’

His voice was firm but soft. His eyes were gentle but persuasive. Reinforcing his smile, he even placed a hand delicately on the woman’s shoulder. Her vacant expression shifted slightly into one of concern.

‘There is something I must do.’

Finally, Tanya’s gaze faltered and she placed the liberated WWI gun in his hands.

‘Do not open door. Do not go inside. Gareth wants nobody speaking to it. I will not be long, Patrick.’

There was a world of difference between them. Beyond the obvious (age, gender, appearance, the times they had lived in before the abduction) there was also their openness. She was reclusive, hiding facts and details about who she was to the point that the Russian was freezing herself out of the group. He was honest in an innocent way, putting himself candidly out in the open for everyone to see.

Patrick felt so sorry for the cold young woman.

‘Aye, lass. Do what you have to; the prisoner will be here when you get back.’

‘Are you sure?’

He met her gaze resolutely. ‘I promise.’

The Russian’s eyes flickered as though his words had triggered a reaction she was determined to suppress. There was so little he knew about the woman but his instincts told him that Tanya had buried most facts about her past for reasons she believed in deeply. A moment of uncertainty passed between them.

The tension disappeared when she smiled, placed a grateful kiss on his cheek and hopped off the chamber. As she left, he watched her leave with his smile slowly slipping off his face.

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The Scourge of London had found solitude at the edge of a fatal fall.

When Gareth had described the underground engine room, Christopher’s mind painted a picture that the real sight eclipsed with its eerie magnificence. A heavy breath filled the cavern like a hollow lung but he was already suffocating. As he leant against the railing circling the platform, sweat dripped from his hair and fell thirty-odd feet towards the raging river below.

When Tanya found him, he was coming to the end of a train of thought that would have led to suicide.

Christopher Veroni, an icon at Symmetry Music Industries and a legend in waiting within the British music scene, could not die. Every fibre in his body shivered at any suggestion that could result in harm coming to him. His survival instincts were just too strong to allow that. If anyone should die...

‘Am I disturbing?’

He turned to the Russian, the woman who had started the completely ridiculous conspiracy, but could not find any words. After silence lingered between them, it was left to Tanya to speak first.

‘I want you to know why we...made love. I do not have feelings for you, Christopher. But you remind me of someone I know and it hurts when I look at you. I am sorry but I did not wish to hurt you.’

It felt like a weak lie. He did not respond.

The engine room was illuminated in a scarlet shade from the lava swirling inside six silver cylinders dominating the far wall of the cavernous room. A quaint waterfall lapped against the nearby wall, splashing into a rocky pool with a calming rhythm. Despite its vastness, the place felt like a coffin as Tanya tried to finalise her apology.

‘I like you, Christopher, but none of us can be distracted by our feelings. We must stay on focus if we want to find the way home, *dah?* No...distractions.’

Still he did not respond.

Slowly, she crossed towards him standing where the stone bridge had once connected both platforms. After a long pause, she placed a hand on his arm. A tender gesture.

‘Ivanov. My last name is Ivanov.’

She finally lost her resolve and turned back up the dark passage. Head down, she disappeared into the shadows and Christopher was alone once again.

*I am the Scourge of London*, the voice inside his mind was somewhere between screaming and weeping in anger. *I’m better than these fools, rungs above them all in every aspect, I deserve to live more than those muppets. If anyone should die...*

Christopher had found his one weakness on this planet; there were countless ways in which he excelled above the standard but only one fault. For a man who did not tolerate failure in his personal or professional life, he ached from knowing his one defining flaw. His Achilles heel, his weakest link, his ultimate failing.

Love.

He was falling in love and that would undoubtedly make him weak. Weakness would be his downfall, it would lead to failure, it would keep him marooned under twin suns until he died. Love had allowed a freak alien to manipulate him away from his goals. This pathetic sensation did

not belong on this jungle world and he had to eradicate it in order to survive.

The one person he had placed his faith in turned out to be a liar. She had betrayed him, whether she meant to or not. As he started running to overtake Tanya, he knew he had to purge this puerile, misguided emotion from his system or else he was destined to die.

*That's what every choice comes down to, isn't it? Love or death.*

And if anyone should die, it should be Sara Langley.

\*\*\*\*\*

The creature inside Sara Langley dug once pristine fingernails into the dirt. It had not been born with those nails but it considered every part of this fresh, young body as its own. The ground felt cold to touch.

How these humans could survive with only five senses was something of a mystery to the creature. It seemed a limited existence lacking dimensions like a painting without colour or form. The beauty of life would forever be dulled in this body; even touch was a distant sensation like a shadow in the mist.

It was dark in the cupboard. The teenager's eyes could not even distinguish the inactive mound in the centre of the room. It had known the smaller rooms could not be opened from inside before the humans did so escape was unlikely. The creature had already tried using the device that had short-circuited Denise Newman a few days ago but without a key, it was just a useless pile of dirt. It had spent some dark period considering all the mistakes leading up to this predicament.

Mistake one; not covering its tracks as it had planted itself amongst the humans (which included leaving its original chamber open as well as leaving footprints for the humans to find). Wisdom and cunning counted for nothing if there was no respect for the enemy.

Mistake two; failing to notice the suspicions of the Russian, suspicions that had evidently led her to spy on the abductees and steal the only human weapon. If the creature had noticed those concerns, it could have taken appropriate action to ensure Tanya never uttered those suspicions.

Mistake three; falling in love.

Suddenly a bright light burst into the room, piercing white overwhelming the limited visual capacity of the creature's inferior eyes.



With hands still bound by the leather belt Gareth had used as restraints, all it could do was shield itself until a shadow stepped into the light.

‘Get up.’

The creature frowned. ‘Patrick?’

Shadows shifted as the Scot reached forward and roughly lifted Sara to her feet. As the creature felt that primitive human sight adjust, she pieced together a picture of his face. He wore a livid expression unlike any he had worn previously and the whites of his eyes were hidden behind his narrow lids.

‘Patrick, what...’

The words ended abruptly when he pressed the Webly MkIV pistol to Sara Langley’s temple, his forefinger scratching impatiently at the trigger.



## twenty-five

Outside Carbonek, Gareth placed his hand on one of the stone pillars that edged the inconceivably suspended bridge leading across the chasm. Despite the warm caress of early evening air wafting through the wild ravine below, the stone was cold. Unnaturally cold stone.

Sighing, he closed his weary eyes. There was so much mystery in everything around him and he seemed incapable of taking any steps to resolve even one enigma. Stone that stayed cold in unnatural heat, a grey dirt path in which nothing seemed to grow, brains in jars full of green goo that suggested sinister intent.

*That's the biggest mystery and it seems like the one you've done nothing about. Why did the aliens take us? What did they want with us? Jesus, Gaz, they've got bits of our brains on shelves and nobody has even tried to figure out why.*

He glanced around the jungle as dusk was settling on the alien world. There was something not right about the way the dying sunlight illuminated the mystical setting in front of him. He glanced at the setting suns and was contemplating what was wrong about them when someone approached.

'Gareth?'

He knew it was Bryony behind him; her silky tones drifted on the breeze but he resisted turning because he could not meet her eyes.

'Gareth, are you okay?'

'It's just...' he started then hesitated before finally turning to face her. 'I'm sorry. This has been a long day, hasn't it?'

'It's been a long week.'

*Has it really been a week, Gaz? Eight days since you woke up in that damned chamber? Man, it feels like a year.*

‘Michael’s nearly finished inside, I thought you might want to be there when he’s done.’

‘No problems, I’ll be in now.’

‘Can I ask you something?’ she asked in a clear, direct voice. ‘What are you planning to do about Sara? I mean, you don’t actually believe Tanya’s ridiculous claims that she’s an alien in disguise, do you?’

He had no way of knowing that the First Dame of the Silver Screen had changed since he had saved her from the chamber. He had no way of understanding how standing up to the beast and coming to terms with Emily Wade’s death had created a new strength inside her. He had no way of comprehending how the woman who had been bullied her whole life was beginning to take responsibility for believing in herself.

Her faith was creating a new Bryony James who believed she would get home with or without his help.

‘I don’t know what to do yet, Bry.’

‘Well, you can’t kill her. No matter what she is, you just can’t kill the poor girl....’

Suddenly Gareth’s head was overwhelmed in a sea of blinding white pain and he dropped to his knees, his balance disrupted. Groaning, he raised a hand to his forehead to subdue the hot spark rippling across his temples.

In the seconds it took Bryony to rush to his side, images flickered across his mind in vicious spurts. An image of himself standing before the cupboard just as the archway disappeared. An image of Sara Langley’s face twisted in a scream, a hand thrown up in defence. An image of a smouldering bullet wound in her chest pumping blood with an eerily casual effort. Finally, he suffered the most horrible image of all.

An image of Bryony’s pale, lifeless face staring blankly into emptiness. Her eyes were completely white and her body was sprawled in an undignified position, skin as pale as snow. Her arm was draped in a deathly stretch across his own corpse on the floor of what looked like Base Camp...

Only Base Camp was burning in flames.

‘Gareth, what’s wrong?’

He looked up with a start as the First Dame of the Silver Screen arrived at his side and the images stopped. Concern spread across her face even as his sight phased back into focus. Frowning, he stumbled to his feet before sucking down a tacky breath.

‘I’ve been seeing visions; premonitions, I suppose. At first I thought they were dreams or hallucinations but they come with this sharp, stinging pain right here.’

He pointed to his temple. She frowned incredulously but he pushed on.

‘First I saw a vision of what would have happened if I had taken a different path in one of the underground tunnels. Then I saw a vision of what would have happened if I jumped off a cliff when the beast attacked me. Just then, see, I had a vision of what will happen if I kill Sara.’

Swallowing hard, he pushed himself to finish.

‘Each time, it was as if something in my head figured out what was the worst choice I could make and played out a little slide show of the consequences. I can’t explain it any clearer than that. I know what would happen if I killed Sara.’

As he trailed off, she fixed his eyes. ‘What?’

Even the twisted voice inside his head waited to find out if he would come clean about the horror he had witnessed. How killing the teenager could possibly result in Bryony’s death, along with his own, was beyond comprehension but it was not the path he could follow. As much as he wanted to reach out to touch her cheek, he fought the urge and smiled softly.

‘It would be bad.’

Clearing his throat, Gareth began striding back towards the facility.

‘Where are you going?’ she called after him.

He hesitated before glancing over his shoulder. ‘I’m going to find out if Sara really is an alien and if she is then I’ll make her show me the way home. I’m not going to die in this place and I’ll do anything to make sure nobody else does either. But I won’t kill her.’

It was a decisive action, one he believed in for a simple reason. He had been turning over the idea that had first hit him when he returned to Carbonek in the dead of night after escaping from the catacombs. The idea that this planet was gradually becoming their home.

*It’s not going to happen*, he thought before the sick demon inside him could voice a counter argument. *I can’t accept this building as home, nobody’s going to be making long-term plans here. No matter what it takes, I’m getting these people home...even if people like Christopher Veroni can’t accept it.*

‘Gareth, wait.’

Bryony ran up to him and he could see the pale shimmer in her eyes of tears waging war. She raised an arm that quivered in the air and he thought for a moment that she would be the one to stroke his face.

‘I’ve been seeing things too.’

Frowning, he clasped her shoulders to steady her. ‘What things?’

‘My mother.’

She laughed suddenly, a shocked little cry that she tried to stifle before pushing herself onwards.

‘It sounds mad, doesn’t it? I’ve never been able to get her out of my head since I left home. But now she’s walking around the corridors here like she owns the place. She talks to me like she’s right there but...I thought I was going crazy, Gareth.’

She fought against the pain, finding strength she never knew she possessed. Gareth could see her resolution like a pale glow emanating from her subtle skin. Then realisation flooded his mind in a wave of images that overwhelmed him.

*That’s what the aliens have been doing. My premonitions, her visions of her mother, Denise’s ability to control the computers, the clouds Tanya can see around our heads...even Anna’s tricks with the Tarot cards. Mental powers. The aliens did something to our brains that gave us superhuman abilities.*

*Are you kidding, Gaz? Why would they take you halfway across the galaxy, slice your brains open, give you all super powers then abandon you to rot? Even if that is the “what”, doesn’t explain the “why” does it?*

He had a few seconds to process the idea that instantly felt crazy in his head. In those seconds, his eyes met hers and the power of her sorrow pushed all other thoughts out of his mind. He was left with a single thought, a pure emotion, a notion powerful enough to reduce his voice to a soft whisper.

‘I’ll protect you, Bryony. And I’m going to get you home. No matter what it takes.’

The moment lingered. All her resolution and all his doubts were lost. Dusk hesitated so that the orange haze of the dying day surrounded them like an aura, tinged with the warmth of the jungle’s tropical breath that caressed their entwined bodies. There was no greater moment of perfection to experience.

They moved together and fell into a perfect kiss.







## book four

Believe in yourself and put faith in your strength,  
Believe in faith and find new strength within you,  
Believe in another and the strength of your faith will be  
tested.



## one

Simon Grady felt his eyelids flickering before feeling anything else. He was still swimming in the depths of his nightmare and it was a few grey moments before he could comprehend that he was awake.

The dream was vivid and fierce with some familiar faces in it. An elderly German lunged towards him, a pretty brunette screamed in an unending motion while the wide eyes of a small boy of Middle Eastern origins stared at him hazily in this dreamlike state.

There was another voice reverberating over the scream, a hoarse voice filled with gritty Irish tones yelling harsh words that hurt his chest. Even divorced from reality, those words still caused him pain. Panic flashed across Simon's blue eyes and he awoke just as his familiar Glock 18 handgun appeared, his finger squeezing the trigger...

He snapped into consciousness as the memory flooded back through the gateway of his dreams. It had all happened; the argument that led to the accidental shooting of a nameless young boy. The exalted US marine had taken the group of so-called Explorers across the river – almost drowning two of them in the process – when there was nothing on the other side.

The words Finbarr O'Driscoll had used to cut his soul returned to haunt him as he awoke under fresh morning sunlight.

*'Damn it, Simon, we're not some poor Saudi family in a war zone and you're not our saviour.'*

The ghosts of Khafji would haunt Simon for the remainder of his life but that life was drawing into focus. Since waking up on this forsaken planet, his world had spun around in kaleidoscope colours and the patterns were not yet clear. Three days trekking through the jungle had not clarified anything. How could anyone make sense of...

'S-Simon?'

Someone called his name, someone nearby and half-asleep. 'What?'  
'Where're the others?'

Frowning, Simon pushed himself up into a seated position and absently swatted aside a few flies buzzing around his head.

*Something's wrong...*

He leapt to his feet and looked around. Something was very, very wrong.

'Where is everyone?' JC Jackson asked again. The young rapper rubbed his eyes and stared around the sheltered spot next to the river where the Explorers had camped the previous night. His LA Lakers vest (new 1999 season kit) was creased and his cornrow 'do was dusted lightly in dirt.

'I...' Simon's words trailed off. Little "Justin" began spinning around in panic.

'Liz? Where's Liz, man? Liz?'

A timid voice responded wearily. 'Wha'?'

The teenage Canadian in the tight mini-skirt (tasteless even for 1987) rose slowly from where she had fallen asleep the previous night, further down the embankment behind a broken log shielding her from the river. Liz Stockton looked paler than the day she had been pulled out of the alien chamber half-dead.

JC scuttled across the jungle floor towards her. 'You okay?'

'Uh-huh,' she groaned, 'why?'

'I just...nothing.'

Simon jogged to the riverbank and strained on his toes to see clearly across the river. Sunbeams danced on the rippling water that gurgled peacefully. The view to the other side was so clear he could make out the gap between the wall of trees where the path led back towards the facility. All was unnaturally still.

'What are those?'

Simon jumped as Katherine Whitman passed his side and squatted down at the riverbank. Her khaki shorts and heavy boots were better suited to the occasion as she had been abducted from a Brazilian rainforest in 2003. He frowned as he knelt next to the British journalist to inspect her discovery.

Where the river had washed over the bank during the night, mud had formed and was drying in the heat of a new day. There were matching

indentations in the mud, uneven groves leading deep into the river itself. Simon thought they almost looked like...

‘Drag marks.’ The words had escaped his mouth quicker than he expected.

‘What are...’ Katherine, dragging a loose strand of matted brown hair from her eyes, could not finish her sentence. There were just too many ways to end it and none of them had positive connotations.

‘Yeah,’ he nodded.

‘But they...’

‘Yeah.’

He had never been renowned for his imagination as a boy; school had been a diversion between sports and girls, nothing more but the muddy marks drew vivid images from his mind. He had pulled fallen compatriots through the dust of Saudi Arabia not long ago and their heels left similar indentations.

‘What the Devil’s going on?’

He glanced up at Sebastian Edwards. The London banker, still dressed in his exquisite suit despite the humidity, appeared caught in the middle of two emotions; confusion and fear. He maintained his dignity by folding his jacket in front of his waist but he looked the most uncomfortable. His thin hair and handlebar moustache were creased where he had slept awkwardly (a rough night for such a distinguished gent). Otherwise he was in tact.

And irate.

‘I don’t know, Sebastian,’ he replied, standing up to address the remainder of the group. ‘When I woke up, the others were gone.’

‘Where did they go?’

He glanced briefly back at the drag marks. ‘I don’t know.’

The flustered banker did not appear to be listening. ‘Well, when are they coming back?’

‘I said...’

‘But why have they left?’

Simon leapt up in frustration to yell in Sebastian’s face. ‘I said I don’t freaking know, all right!’

As his echoing words faded, silence settled around the jungle. A dense wall of exotic trees and plants surrounded the remaining members of the group that had left the facility a few days ago in search of a way

home. Nobody noticed unseen birds twittering deeper in the undergrowth.

‘They must’ve gone back,’ JC said suddenly, an exclamation that escaped his mouth too quickly to stop.

Simon turned on him, eyes widening, pupils dilating. ‘What?’

The young rapper recoiled as the marine bore down on him, fingers anxiously twisting the seam of his vest. The whites in JC’s eyes reflected Simon’s image.

For the first time since the craziness began, Simon could literally see himself through the eyes of someone else. The image was tall and domineering, even intimidating. With his crew cut head shining under the two suns and piercing blue eyes digging into JC’s soul, it was a sight patented by the US military (copyright Chicago 1991) to strike fear into the enemy.

‘I was just waxing, you know? It’s just...I thought maybe the others went back to the facility like Finbarr said he was gonna.’

Liz stepped up to his side with confusion etched on her pretty face. ‘What did Finbarr say?’

The rapper was suddenly under the spotlight. ‘I-I-I was just...’

‘Spit it out, boy!’

Everyone turned to Sebastian who had raised his voice in such a manner that shocked everyone but the Londoner. Even Simon took a step backwards as if to distance himself from the vile tone (and sentiment) in the banker’s voice. JC was so shocked that he absently lost his anxiety.

‘He reckoned we had to go back to the facility. He was asking me about it last night before we turned in. The dude was really upset.’

Simon felt colour drain from his face but before he could turn over this shocking news of betrayal, Katherine responded quickly. It saved him from answering when he had lost his ability to form words.

‘He wouldn’t have tried crossing the river in the middle of the night with that boy still recovering. Finbarr wouldn’t take a chance like that and even if he did, why only take half the group? Besides, there’s no place to cross and the trees on this side of the river are too short to reach the bank opposite.’

‘And why would he leave us behind without saying anything?’ Liz added. ‘Finbarr...’

Another voice interrupted her. ‘It matters not.’

They spun around to see the last member of the Explorers left. Tom Kennedy, a savage killer snatched from a British Empire penal colony at the end of the eighteenth century, stepped out from the shade of the trees with serene intent. His jaw line was infested with stubble, his blond hair was a tangled mess and his toned body glistened with jungle-dew and sweat.

‘The Irishman has gone and he shan’t be returning. We are alone now.’

While Simon struggled with his words, the others turned to stare across the gurgling river they had crossed the previous day. Whatever had happened during the night, the most obvious truth, delivered on the light of dawn, resonated within them all.

There was no Finbarr O’Driscoll, no Salvatore Costanza, no Ganesh Omar, no Franz Muller, no wounded Middle Eastern boy. Of the eleven Explorers who had departed the facility three days earlier, there were only six left.





## two

‘I don’t want to go in there.’

JC glanced at Liz and felt overwhelmed again. It was not her beauty he was struggling with – though she looked awesome in her daring purple strap top and those knee-high boots – but the pressure of reassuring her. She had confided her anxieties in him and so far, he had failed to put her at ease.

They were standing side by side in front of the huge tree-line boundary that stretched into forever. The jungle seemed to be glaring back at them with a stern, intimidating gaze that rivalled Sergeant Grady’s. It reminded JC of the incident a few days ago when an unseen creature had chased them through the undergrowth. The jungle had been as eerily mocking then.

‘We don’ts got a lot of choice, Liz. Unless Katherine finds something, it’s this or try crossing the river again.’

Liz had still not fully recovered from her ordeal. Her clothes might have dried in the heat of the suns and her quivering had stopped but the emotional effects of almost drowning were still evident. In her eyes, mostly.

*Can’t blame her*, he sighed to himself. *Can’t imagine what I would’ve done if it was me.*

Actually, he had a clear image of how that situation would have played out. The brightest star in the sky would have panicked, sunk and died at the bed of an alien river. Even with Finbarr to rescue him, JC was certain that he would still somehow have ended up as fish food.

Not that there were any fish in that grubby river...

His mind returned to something Liz had said shortly after her rescue from the river. Something about things in the water. Had she seen something down in the water?

*Angels*, he remembered, *that's what she said. Angels in the water.*

She had been suffering from the combined effects of exhaustion and terror. She had swallowed enough vile, brown water to fill an Olympic swimming pool. Between the panic, disorientation and the way the river obscured her vision, she had probably seen nothing more than a loose branch washing downstream and her mind had twisted that into an image of an angel.

So close to death, JC guessed it was not a wholly unexpected image.

'I don't want to go back there either.'

He breathed carefully, attempting composure. 'Well, we can't live on the riverbank forever, can we?'

He had meant it as a compassionate delivery of the truth; his unease warped his words into something that might have been construed as impatient or even sarcastic. When she turned back to him, Liz met his gaze with a blank expression.

'I guess,' she answered blandly before he could find an apology.

It was that moment when Katherine returned. She had volunteered to trek up and down the bank in search of any signs the others had left behind. JC had to agree with her belief that Finbarr and the others would not have attempted crossing the river at night but the journalist insisted on checking first.

'Kath,' Simon called from the side of the river as she returned, 'anything to report?'

Katherine hesitated; the way Simon had addressed her sounded like a general ordering an update from his scouts on the battlefield. JC watched as, with a concealed sigh, she crossed towards the marine as the others circled around.

'Nothing east or west from what I can see. No tracks, no sign the others tried to cross the river...not a trace of them.'

Everyone left in the group that had been misleadingly labelled as explorers shared a succession of uneasy glances. Then, one by one, they turned their attention to the muddy tracks leading into the water.

'If this is the only sign of what happened to everyone,' Liz asked, 'then what happened to everyone?'

Simon straightened up and moved to answer the question. After a twitchy hesitation, he seemed to push himself into a response.

'My guess would be that Finbarr must've created a raft or barge of some sort. Maybe he used logs and branches from the trees here, binding

them with vines. He then put the boy onto the raft, dragged it down to the river and swam across with the rest of them.'

JC sensed that the marine did not fully believe his own explanation. Katherine certainly did not.

'Finbarr wouldn't do that and Ganesh certainly wouldn't let him move the boy in the middle of the night with low visibility across a river that almost killed Liz.'

Liz flinched again beside JC, a whimper escaping her. Between the electric field she had been stored in back at the laboratory and the drowning incident, she had been through a lot since her abduction (as if that was not bad enough). Her skin had shrivelled in the unbearable heat, making her already pale body seem wafer thin beneath her revealing clothes. Given all that, she seemed to be holding onto reality with a tenuous grip.

*A real man would move to comfort her, he admonished himself. Regardless of his feelings or the gulf in class between them, a real man would put that all aside to make sure...*

'It's all right, Liz.'

Those words had not come from his mouth. Tom Kennedy had been the man to utter the reassurances JC had been searching for himself. The convict placed one hand gingerly on her shoulder and quickly removed it before she could react.

'Sorry, dear,' Katherine, realising her insensitivity, apologised sincerely if a little quickly. 'But I still can't believe the others crossed the river.'

'Well, if they didn't and there're no tracks leading into the jungle, where did they go?' Simon asked, his brittle composure straining.

Nobody had an answer. Except...

'The angels took them.'

Everyone turned to Liz with an eclectic range of expressions that all mirrored confusion. The Canadian could not meet their eyes as hers were focused on the rippling waves ambling past the six survivors.

Sebastian huffed in disbelief. 'What are you talking about, young lady?'

The snide little man was really beginning to annoy JC. His attitude needed an adjustment; he was negative, disrespectful and JC suspected the man was an extreme bigot. The way he talked to JC in particular was disgusting and most of the group obviously felt the same based on their responses when Sebastian addressed him as "boy".

Liz was still only partly aware of the world around her. 'In the water, I saw them. The angels.'

Katherine smiled softly and placed an arm around her shoulders. 'What do you mean? What angels?'

'I couldn't see them well but they had huge, white...wings. They swam through the water like they were floating on a cloud. I couldn't see them well but they were there. With us. In the water. Watching.'

Simon, who was standing just outside Liz's line of sight, rolled his eyes. JC noticed.

*He doesn't believe her. Neither do I really but that don't matter. She believes what she's saying and a real man would step forward to offer his support regardless how he felt. A real man would put her first.*

But JC was not a real man. His brother had proved that to him...

'It's okay, Liz,' Katherine tried sounding reassuring. Liz saw through it and pushed her arm away.

'I'm not crazy, you know. It's true, I saw it. Finbarr must've seen it too, they were right in front of me when that tree fell on top of us.'

Finbarr, whether he had seen angels in the water, was not around to back her up.

'It doesn't matter, anyway,' the marine interjected, 'Finbarr and the others are gone. That doesn't change the choice we had last night when we made camp. Do we try to cross the river and crawl back to camp with our tails between our legs or do we push on into the jungle in search of the way home?'

In the fresh silence that followed, Katherine strode up to Simon with purpose in her eyes.

'Simon, a word.'

She pushed past, knocking his shoulder with hers. He huffed with the impact, hesitated with uncertainty then hurriedly followed as Katherine strode out of earshot of the others.

When JC turned back to the others, he noticed Liz standing near the edge of the riverbank. She was staring into the murky water, her pale expression glinting in the light of the warming day. Her arms were folded defensively and she looked lost in her worries.

A real man stepped forward, gently placed his hands on her shoulders and eased her away from the edge of the river.

'Worry not, Elizabeth,' Tom whispered softly, 'nothing in there can hurt you.'

Liz smiled up at the brutish thug who should have died in a New South Wales road gang hundreds of years before she was born and allowed him to lead her away. JC could only watch as his heart began to fracture.



## three

Simon lowered himself to the uneven ground so his back propped against a tree he guessed was coniferous. It was the nearest tree to the fire so no matter what type it was, it provided the best vantage point for his watch.

His five remaining comrades were already asleep. The spot they had settled into on the north-eastern face of the hill was protected from the wind. It had been a quiet procession up the hillside. Their numbers had diminished to the point that it made no sense keeping two-man watches. JC had taken the first detail but quickly succumbed to sleep after waking Simon for the midnight shift.

*You made the right decision, soldier,* the drill instructor voice in his head could not bring itself to sound impressed. *Regardless of what happened to the others, staying in one position for consecutive nights is never tactically sound under these circumstances.*

It might have been the right decision but it had not been easy to get the others to realise that.

‘Come here.’

He looked up but nobody else was stirring. The words were an echo of his memory of a few hours ago.

‘Come here,’ Katherine had called as they walked away from the others, at her instruction. The British brunette had not sounded too happy as the “word” she wanted to have with him sounded intensely serious. When they stopped, they were out of earshot beneath the shade of the jungle.

‘What is it, Katherine?’ he responded with a blatant lack of enthusiasm.

‘You don’t still want to go into the jungle, do you?’

He squared up, arching his back to flex his chest defiantly. 'It's the best choice we have. You said yourself there's no way back across the river and I don't plan on waiting here for those traitors to come back. They left us, remember?'

'We don't know what happened, Simon.'

'But we know the result; we're alone, Finbarr's not coming back and we're still nowhere close to getting home. I'd have thought you of all people would've understood the need to do something.'

The journalist recoiled with a frown. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You've been in places like this, right? You know we can't just stop halfway through the journey and quit. We nearly lost somebody getting here so would you risk worse trying to go back?'

That silenced Katherine. She had seemed in control of her emotions since their awakening back at the facility but the situation had changed drastically since then. The Oxford educated filmmaker could no longer rely on the likes of Gareth Oakley for salvation. She only had two choices; give up or keep fighting.

'I bow to your experience on this, then. What do you recommend, Sergeant?'

Simon met her gaze; there was fear creeping into the corners of her eyes. Trying not to appear too uncomfortable, he smiled as warmly as he could manage. 'You can start by calling me Simon, how about that?'

*What's did I say, Sergeant? First name basis? These civvies need structure, a chain of command they can respect and depend on when the need arises. This isn't an excuse for fraternising.*

He bit his lip; he was not fraternising with Katherine Whitman.

'It's a start...Simon.' Her smile was weaker but it was definitely a start.

Wiping a layer of sweat from his lip, he glanced back at JC, Liz, Tom and Sebastian. 'You and I, we need to put on a unified front. The others need to trust what we're trying to do because we're too small a group to split up again. Agreed?'

She nodded slowly, her tangled hair dangling across her eye until she batted it aside.

'Let's wait until midday on the chance that the others might come back; you never know, that freaking Irish moron might've just taken them for a walk or something. If they're not back by then, we'll pack up and head there.'



He pointed into the jungle at an upward angle. Katherine followed the direction he was pointing but had to squint to find the hillside hidden behind the overlapping trees. Simon had spotted it in the distance the previous night, a snippet of his training reminding him to scope out the perimeter before making camp.

‘Why there?’

He made sure his voice was low even though the others remained clustered beside the river. ‘It’ll provide ample cover, it’s the first step into the jungle keeping on our southerly route and the altitude might give us a better view. It’s not far from the river either so if the others come back, we can see them.’

Reaching into one of the many small pockets his uniform had been fitted with, he pulled out a compact set of binoculars. Standard issue with the US marines, especially useful when traversing great distances or locating hidden targets. Katherine cocked an eyebrow that tweaked her smile mischievously.

‘You soldiers are useful for something, after all.’

‘We aim to please, ma’am.’

‘You can start by calling me Katherine, how about that?’

Simon snapped out of the memory and glanced across the darkened camp at the British journalist sleeping in the nook of a tree he guessed might be an elm. Her sun-kissed legs curled out of her cargo shorts and the leaf packs she had crafted expertly were stacked beside her sheltered head. Each exhale tickled a loose leaf on the nearest pack, a calming sight.

With a sigh, he dragged his gaze back down the hillside between the trees, towards the river.

Though he could not see the elusive moon from behind the clouds filling the sky, there was enough light in the world so he could catch the occasional glint of rushing water far below them. Their position was near the top of a hill that had been a chore to climb. This patch between the trees was the best spot to observe their old camping ground.

*Why?*

He frowned and allowed his lids to close briefly; not for too long, just enough to freshen his eyes.

*Don’t avoid the question, soldier. Why bother watching when you know the Irishman and his followers are gone? Doesn’t matter where they went, they’re not coming back.*

‘They’re coming back.’

This memory had followed the last one by about five minutes. After agreeing the finer details with Katherine, he had returned to the others to discuss their next steps. The news that they would be moving on within a few hours had not placated Liz Stockton.

‘We don’t know that, Liz,’ he had answered as they all sat in a circle beneath two suns that were heating up this forsaken world. ‘Why would they go anywhere if they planned to come back, especially with the boy in the condition he’s in?’

‘Because you shot him.’

Her bitter response only rocked him briefly. ‘You think I don’t know that? I accept responsibility for what happened last night but that doesn’t change the fact that they’re gone and without knowing why...’

‘What about these “angels” Liz saw?’

Simon had been shocked when the convict had interrupted him. Not because of the interruption or the challenge to his authority that it represented. He was shocked because Tom sounded like he believed the girl’s crazy story.

‘What about them, Tom?’

Tom had the eyes of the group focused on him but he did not waver from Simon’s glare. ‘Consider if something is in the water, do we not need to take action to ensure no more souls go missing this night?’

His eloquent Victorian words were delivered uncouthly but they represented a valid point.

‘That’s why we should move the camp,’ Simon had answered, struggling to drag his gaze from the convict’s. ‘We’ll find higher ground away from the river where we can still watch for the others. If they don’t come back by the time we wake up tomorrow, we push on. Understood?’

It was authoritative, it was bold, it was delivered with resolute harshness suitable for their predicament.

*It’s taken a while, soldier,* his mind commented dryly, *but maybe we’ll make a leader out of you yet. And maybe – just maybe – you’ll get home again.*

Simon jumped out of the memory this time. Something had caught his attention but he was so tired and lost in thought that he had not registered it in time. He just sat up with a start, sure that something had just happened.

With slow, purposeful movements, he pulled the black Glock 18 from his holster. As his eyes darted around the darkness, his thumb rested on the safety but did not release it. After the incident with the Middle

Eastern boy, he did not want another mistake for his guilt to battle through.

The jungle was still and relatively silent. The fire crackled with disinterest and for an instant, Simon believed he could see movement by the river. A slithering shadow passing across the spot they had camped in the previous night.

He watched silently through the midnight darkness for almost five minutes before returning the weapon to his holster and leaning back against the possibly coniferous tree.



## four

Morning dawned with a dense freshness. The scent of moist grass filled JC's lungs as he sucked in his first breath of the new day. Intense sunshine grazed his cheek on a breeze that filtered through the trees.

The LA lifestyle was worlds away from this peace. Back home, JC would never have dreamt of sleeping under the stars. That was for homeless bums on the Walk of Fame or country hicks who lost their trailers to drinking debts. If he had even camped out in his garden as a boy, he was more likely to get shot and robbed while he slept.

For the first time since his abduction, he awoke without fear following him out of his dreams.

'Morning.'

JC opened his eyes to the welcoming sight of Liz Stockton stoking the burned out fire. Her knees were tucked underneath her, displaying sores on the soles of her feet. From his lowly position staring up as golden sunlight folded through her mousey blonde hair, she was the one who looked like an angel.

'Hey...is breakfast ready?'

She laughed mockingly. 'Yeah, we got sausages, bacon, eggs, fried tomatoes, even some baked beans. We're out of French toast, though.'

'Well,' he sighed, sitting up slowly while his head refocused, 'I'd be happy with a chilled glass of OJ and climbing into a proper bed.'

'This is the best I can do, sorry.' She held out a small leaf cup. 'One sip to start off the day.'

He accepted the water but glanced up at Liz. He had only known her a few days, maybe a week, but he could tell she had lost weight. Hell, they all probably looked like shadows of their former selves. When the trek recommenced, there would be greater trials ahead of them all.

With a sigh, he lifted the cup to his mouth, allowed the water to graze his lips then lowered it. The sensation tingled, a tantalising tease of thirst he could hardly feel at the bottom of his empty stomach. Smacking his lips, he handed the cup back to Liz.

‘Delicious.’

She smiled softly without knowing that he had taken a fraction of his ration but knowing that even if he had, it would never have been enough. She could not fathom how her smile helped him through the day even as his mouth dried to a crisp in the baking suns.

The Explorers prepared for the next stage of their journey. While Katherine and Liz packed up their excuse for a camp and collected rainwater, the men conquered the crest of the hill. Scouting ahead, they stood side-by-side staring down into a fresh valley covered by an unending blanket of greenery stretching as far as any of them could see.

‘This is insanity,’ Tom scowled in frustration at the sight, ‘we could spend the rest of our lives ambling through this forsaken land and find naught but trees and mud.’

JC had not really held much hope that salvation would lie beyond the hilltop. Since they had left the facility, his belief in the possibility of salvation had dwindled daily. This sight almost made that belief disappear completely.

‘You see insanity, Tom,’ Simon suddenly exclaimed, ‘I see hope.’

He pointed towards the south-west where two hills rose like peaks that outlined the sky. Nobody, not even JC, could see anything remarkable about those peaks but one by one, they noticed something between them.

A glint of light.

‘What is that?’ Tom muttered, shielding his eyes from the sun in an attempt to sharpen the view.

‘No idea but it doesn’t look natural, does it? Maybe sunlight reflecting off metal or a beacon of some kind. Bottom line, it’s a direction. A target to aim for.’

He pulled a compass from his pocket and tried plotting a course as Sebastian stepped up to the marine, fidgeting nervously with the buttons on his tunic.

‘Simon, far be it from me to call into question your superior experience in such matters but I wonder unto what this course will lead us? That speck of light on the horizon is hardly a way home, in my eyes.’

Simon looked up from the compass. ‘Sebastian, I...’

‘It’s not as though I harbour a desire to stay here, you understand, but there are days of toil between us and a light that may prove nothing more than a reflection of a discarded object incapable of saving us. Should we commit to that path based solely on the prospect of a solitary light?’

JC found himself answering before the marine could form a response. ‘Look, dude, what’ve we got to lose? It’s probably just two days or so...’

‘I asked the Sergeant’s opinion,’ Sebastian rounded suddenly on him, venom forming in the corners of his mouth, ‘not some Negro kid dressed like a circus act.’

Everyone else froze in shock at Sebastian’s latest outburst, preparing for another uncomfortable silence from the recipient of his racist slur. Even JC.

Then a thought popped into his head. A single sentence first uttered nearly two years ago, a sentence delivered into his mind with as much venom and disgust as Sebastian’s insult. A memory in the voice of his brother.

*If you don’t harden up, bro, people will be walking over you the rest of your life.*

JC snapped and launched himself at Sebastian with a force he did not know he possessed. He grabbed the startled banker by the neck and shoved him backwards into the nearest tree. JC felt divorced from his whole body as rage suddenly filled every pore he possessed.

‘I’ve had enough of your crap, man. It’s not cool, understand? It’s not cool.’

His fingers were clamped around Sebastian’s neck, not too tightly but a squeamish yelp was caught in his throat nonetheless. It was his eyes, shimmering with fear, which seemed to contain the most potent sign of his fear.

‘You need to learn a few things,’ JC hissed in anger, ‘and I’m happy to be your teacher, dig?’

Simon clasped his shoulders and pulled him backwards on his heels. The marine easily overpowered him, dragging his grip from the timid Londoner’s throat.

‘Easy, JC, tone it down.’

While the rapper was subdued, Sebastian checked his pockets with a deep breath. Whether the incident adjusted his attitude as well, JC could not tell because the banker lowered his gaze. With anger coursing through his veins, JC pulled away from the marine before his fury could explode inside him.

‘Sebastian,’ he heard Simon’s admonishment without turning to watch, ‘there’s a few things you need to know about how the world’s changed since...when did you say you were taken?’

A wheezing response. ‘November 13<sup>th</sup> in the year of Our Lord 1888.’

‘Well I’m sure back then, people with skin like JC’s were treated differently to how they are in his time. Since 1888, people have learnt tolerance and don’t judge others based on the colour of their skin. If we’re all going to get through this, you need to learn that too.’

JC eyes were watering and he wanted to blame it on the heat.

‘Now,’ the marine continued, unknowingly resorting to a calmness that echoed Gareth Oakley’s handling of similar situations, ‘if you can keep an open mind, I’m sure JC can be trusted not to raise his hands again. What do you say, Justin?’

JC was stuck on angry glare mode.

‘Damn it, JC,’ Simon suddenly yelled, ‘answer me.’

Too frightened by the sharp tones to recoil, JC focused on Sebastian. The banker was not such an intimidating sight; small, puny almost, middle-aged with a beady pair of eyes. In his quaint, antiquated suit, Sebastian looked utterly harmless in comparison with the strapping marine at his side.

Despite their physical differences, JC could not put his finger on the real reason why he felt so uncomfortable around Sebastian.

‘Sure.’

The banker swallowed hard. Maybe an ounce of the bigotry he had been raised with in the nineteenth century was swallowed along with the bile in his mouth.

‘Then, I humbly beg your forgiveness, Mr Jackson. Evidently, I have to accept that my beliefs are somewhat...outdated and need to be addressed. I would be grateful if you would accept my apology.’

After an uneasy moment, Sebastian stepped forward and offered his hand meekly for a handshake.

An image of JC’s elder brother flashed across his mind. An image of that cold Sunday morning waiting in the passenger seat of Marcus’ Buick on a quiet road on the edge of El Segundo. An image of his brother’s face yelling at him, the last time JC saw him alive.

With a shiver sitting against his spine, he grasped the hand on offer and shook it briskly.



## five

JC trudged through the jungle with his head down. The overnight downpour had transformed the hill into a tropical mudslide and descending what they had easily ascended the previous day was a chore. Each step was a dangerous gamble but the rapper was too preoccupied to pay his terrain the respect it deserved.

The memory of the last time he had seen his brother had dominated his dreams for days. The full recollection was always just outside of his grasp but snippets were enough. Marcus's grip on the wheel almost squeezing the leather out through his fingers; a layer of snow on the rooftops; the scent of fumes as the '86 Buick spluttered into life; his brother's last words before driving off...

*It's not my fault*, he reminded himself for the millionth time.

The six remaining abductees picked their way carefully down the slope holding onto trees for support. The glint of light between the twin peaks soon disappeared from sight as they reached the floor of the jungle and strode wearily through the endless army of greenery that encompassed them again. With Simon's compass providing direction, they plunged into the heart of the tropical wilderness.

'Do you think this jungle covers the whole world?' Liz asked, skipping to catch up with him.

JC was not in the mood for company but he answered without raising his head. 'Who knows? There must be, like, some civilisation around. Somebody built that lab-thing back there, it'd be really weird if that were the only building on the planet.'

'Then where are the others?'

He frowned, lifting his head slightly in contemplation. 'Beats me. I mean, it could be worse; we could've all woken up surrounded by...whatever it was that took us and they could have just popped us all

back to sleep until...well, until they did whatever they wanted to do to us.'

JC had written a song once entitled "All the King's Men" where he lyricised about oppression and hate. One of the lines in that song flashed across his mind. He could even remember spinning it at his audition for Eastland Music.

*They hide in the shadows preparing for annihilation while the innocent's futility is broadcast in syndication.*

He was interrupted before his thoughts could lead him down a dark path.

'Excuse me, Mister Jackson,' Sebastian approached him cautiously.

Liz and JC turned towards him; there was a cautious anxiety about the banker, an unease that seemed to sit comfortably with him. Even the way he held his neatly folded jacket in front of his lower body. Whatever life he came from, JC could imagine him approaching more familiar people with that same quaint nervousness framed in his genteel grey suit.

'What?' JC knew his tone was sharp but could not take it back.

'Might I have a moment of your time?' He glanced at Liz, his gaze lingering for a moment before turning back to JC. 'For a brief talk, you understand.'

JC paused before nodding to Liz; she paused before turning to catch up with the others; Sebastian paused before continuing to walk at a slower pace, allowing the others to get ahead of them.

'So,' JC started, falling into the same stride, 'what's up, homes?'

The little banker frowned in confusion at the reference before visibly shaking it off. 'I wanted to explain a little about my world. That is, the London I came from as opposed to the planet from whence we both came.'

'What for?'

'To illustrate our differences,' Sebastian sighed, looking up to meet his eye, 'not be ruled by them.'

JC could not help but smile softly. He knew enough to understand what a big deal it was to admit there was a problem between two people. When problems stemmed from such a basic notion as the way one person was brought up in contrast to another, it made it even harder to resolve that problem.

Sometimes, a real man must face his own inadequacies before accepting the failings of others.

‘Go on.’

‘London is choking on this industrial surge. Green smog fills the air, pea soupers we call them. The streets are filthy, cluttered places of death. I have seen two sides to my city; in the west, the regency rules from pristine homes, driven by carriages and motorcars that cost more than the lives of the people in the east where barefooted boys earn a pittance sweeping chimneys and death plays its funny little games with the poor.’

It was a brutal analysis of the world he knew. JC could only listen as Sebastian poured out his heart.

‘My grandfather used to tell tales concerning the abolition of slavery. In 1833, the government passed an act outlawing the practice but my dear grandfather rigorously opposed the notion. I found his stories...unsettling.’

‘I know the history,’ JC muttered. His own grandfather had been a source of stories that put an engaging twist on a harsh truth. Maybe they had more in common than either of them realised.

‘There is history,’ Sebastian continued, ‘and there is truth. The colonies continued to practice the trade illegally long after the act was passed. Why just a few months ago, I watched a crowd heckle a...man in the street for no clear purpose other than the colour of his skin. The law may have changed but it takes more to change man’s ways.’

‘I guess there was plenty different back in your time.’

‘One thing was constant; the flaws of humanity.’

JC stopped walking, the seriousness in Sebastian’s voice bringing him to a halt. When Sebastian turned around, there was a shimmer in his eyes that reflected the sternness in his tone.

‘We are all flawed creatures, Mr Jackson, everyone of us. Our paths through life may have taken us in different directions but the way we walked it was still guided by the manner of who we are. Man is always capable of hate no matter what age he lives in.’

The jungle was static around them. JC seemed to be sinking in the mud underneath his feet but in truth, he was sinking deeper into himself. He felt smaller, more insignificant. His blip of an existence made the brightest star in the sky seem like nothing more than a faint flicker on the surface of the sun.

‘My grandfather was filled with hate,’ Sebastian was almost spitting with anger, ‘a loathsome bile that encompassed anything that did not conform to a picture painted by his obscene mind. I will not walk his path, Mr Jackson, I will not.’

His last three words echoed through the jungle, dissipating from an echo to a stinging sensation in the banker's eyes. It seemed like a long time before JC stepped forward.

'JC...Justin, if you have to be formal, but I'd prefer JC.'

The glaze over Sebastian's eyes melted. 'Then JC it is.'

'You know, things ain't a whole lot different in my time. Guys like me still got to fight for our chances and sometimes, we got to *fight* for our chances.'

He swallowed hard as his brother's final words repeated on him.

'But there's hope, Seb. Gareth told me that in his time, one of the main candidates to become the next President of the United States is African American. Can you believe it? Step by step, we're changing the way we walk that path.'

Sebastian glanced away for a moment, arms on his hips and eyes turned to the heavens. JC did not know who this strange little man was but what he sensed was an unsettled soul searching for something. A man with troubles of his own suddenly pushed into perspective by circumstances beyond his control. A simple, flawed human walking a road destiny had laid out for him.

With a soft smile, JC offered his hand in friendship.

'I'm happy to put aside the past...to walk the path with you.'

Sebastian stopped and stared at the offered hand. He stared at it for a long time, an uncomfortably long time, an uncomfortably long time without even changing his expression.

*Whatever is going through his mind, JC thought, he's being asked to put aside something he grew up believing. A big ask.*

'JC? Come on, the others are...'

Liz came jogging back through the trees, calling his name. She stopped when she realised what was happening. Sebastian frowned at her, interrupted from his thoughts, before turning back to the offered hand in front of him.

'Let us move on,' the banker whispered before accepting the hand.

It was a brief but significant moment. Sebastian's eyes told JC that the banker was willing to put aside the bigoted morality he knew in order to put their survival first. No matter what the motivation, a flawed human seemed willing to put aside an evil thought.

His smile widened and he shook Sebastian's hand firmly, maybe even proudly.

## SIX

Simon grabbed the stem of a particularly large leaf that blocked the path ahead and wrenched it out of the soil. It had a tough root, stubborn and refusing to relent. When it finally relented, the brittle stem crumpled in his hand. A part of him knew the plant was already beginning to die.

*Stupid freaking plants*, he mused grimly.

The trees were more densely populated as they pushed deeper into the jungle. What he could have done with a blade of some sort, like the knife Tom Kennedy had woken up with (which was probably back at the facility under Teacher's regime). He wanted to keep a straight line due south-west but the landscape made that difficult. With the stubborn leaf removed, he dropped it carelessly and stepped between two tightly packed firs.

The morning had been a difficult toil for everyone but complaining had been reduced to a minimum. Conversation of any form was rare as the six reluctant trekkers pushed further into the unknown. Every so often, one of the group would look behind them as though waiting for somebody to catch up. The suns were insatiable above the canopy created by the trees, which did not offer much protection from the heat and generated a greenhouse effect to intensify the temperature.

'Makes you appreciate the path, doesn't it?'

He glanced back as Katherine broke through the gap between the trees after him. She was glowing with the glimmer of exertion and after tying her hair back with a band, her eyes were afforded room to shine.

'That neat, straight line mapped out for us,' she continued with a hint of a smile, 'it was so simple, wasn't it? Even the ground was cool and flat to lie on. But this is a proper hike through the jungle.'

'Like the rainforests?'

'A little different. Only one sun there, remember?'

‘How could I forget?’

He continued following the line his compass pointed out for him. He would frequently check he was on the correct bearing but his sense of direction was legendary in the Corps.

‘At least in Brazil,’ Katherine mused, matching his stride, ‘I knew the BBC was waiting with a leased helicopter in case we had an emergency to radio in. I also knew that, after a few days, I’d be back in a hotel bed watching bad TV and drinking the mini-bar dry.’

‘I know what you mean. When we went on manoeuvres, the thought of going home kept my spirits up.’

Their conversation dried up. Simon knew that “home” as a concept was in the forefront of all their thoughts. Every step along this loose, uncharted path was either leading them closer to or further away from the possibility of returning to Earth.

His own thoughts were interrupted when something flashed in front of his eyes.

‘What was that?’ Katherine jumped, startled by the same motion.

Simon drew his weapon and held it up ready, searching for the flash. It happened again, a distant blur between the trees that shot across his vision before he could see what it was. He followed its course with the gun but his finger hovered above the trigger, not wishing another incident like the one involving the Middle Eastern boy.

*Remember your training*, he reminded himself before the drill instructor could lecture him. *Identify your target first.*

Katherine edged to his side. ‘Simon, what the Hell was that?’

He was about to answer when the blur flew past again, even closer. This time, it stopped on one of the branches of a nearby elm tree.

It was a bird.

“Bird” was a vague description of the creature perched on the branch. It was small, maybe as big as a robin. Slick, silver fur seemed to shine in the fractured sunlight. There were two large wings wrapped around its body and a stunted beak that looked like ivory judging by its shine.

‘Oh my God,’ Katherine whispered, ‘it’s a bird, Simon. A bloody bird.’

He struggled for words as the crazy little creature sat casually on the branch, not even staring back at them. ‘Yeah, I can see.’

‘You know, this is really the first animal we’ve seen. Not counting the beast JC saw, of course, but Ganesh and I were talking the other day

about how there was absolutely no wildlife in this jungle. This little guy proves there is.'

Frowning bemusedly, he lowered his weapon slowly; the bird did not pose a significant threat. 'How do you know it's a guy? I don't even know if you can call it a bird, Kath.'

The little creature's head, slightly oblong and disjointed at the jaw, twitched for an instant. As they both watched, it opened out wings that spanned twice the length of its body. Simon's jaw gaped as he noticed two secondary wings underneath the larger ones. With a graceful beat of four wings (which reminded Simon of the fighter ships in the *Star Wars* movies), the creature lifted off the branch and flew into the jungle with such velocity that it just seemed to disappear.

'Incredible,' he whispered, wonder spilling out of his mouth.

'How come there's so little wildlife in this place? The rainforests back home are teeming with bugs and beasts and all sorts. That's the first creature we've seen in, what...four days?'

Simon mused on her point. Apart from JC's claims that some invisible beast had chased him back at the facility, he could not remember even hearing any other living creatures. Not until...

'It's this side of the river,' he muttered softly. 'I remember swatting away these little midges or something when we woke up by the river. There was birdsong, I was listening to it last night. And that X-wing thing, too. Don't you see? The wildlife is only on this side of the river.'

It sounded insane as he said it. Katherine made the idea sound even crazier.

'That doesn't make any sense. Why wouldn't animals migrate across the river, especially flying animals? What is there about that side of the river that...'

Her voice trailed off. It was a train of thoughts that offered little more than further questions neither of them could answer. With a dry cough to clear his lungs, he holstered his gun and started walking again.

'Let's keep moving.'

He strode on purposefully as the others caught up, JC and Liz sharing a light laugh somewhere behind him. After a couple of yards, he also heard Katherine joggling to catch up with him.

'You know something, Simon? There was a good reason so many wanted to stay with Gareth.'

His blood suddenly chilled but his feet pushed on, detaching themselves from his control. He felt his fingers scrunch together tightly but Katherine continued when his voice failed to interject.

‘He listened. I don’t know if that’s part of your training regime with the marines but it’s a pretty important part of being a leader. Being able to stop long enough to recognise something and take time to absorb it before rushing into a decision.’

‘Is that what you think I’ve been doing, Kath? Rushing into decisions?’

She hesitated but did not stop. ‘You’re probably just used to reacting. I don’t know, maybe that’s what makes a good soldier but it doesn’t always make a good leader. You need to be able to take a step back and analyse things like...’

‘Like Gareth, huh? Like Finbarr? Are you trying to say that I’m incapable of leading this group and finding the way home?’

This time she did fall silent.

*Don’t take that crap, Marine, the voice in his head yelled louder than usual. You’ve been trained by the finest military force in the world, you’re programmed for survival and this little woman doesn’t know what she’s talking about. She’s questioning whether a US Marine would make a better leader than a schoolteacher or an inbred Irish barman. Well, it’s time to put her straight.*

He was about to respond defiantly when he remembered the way he had yelled at JC on top of the hill. The kid had just been standing up for himself when Sebastian threw some nineteenth century racism in his face and Sergeant Grady had come down hardest on the victim. His deep desire to exert authority on the innocent party, a need to control everyone and everything at any cost, became visible to him for the first time in his life.

His mouth suddenly seemed drier than it had ever felt in the Kuwaiti heat.

‘Just think about it,’ she whispered softly before pushing ahead of him.

Simon’s inner demon fell silent. It was usually such a tough voice, stubborn and rigid and refusing to relent. His feet finally gave in, his brittle fist crumpling in his hand. A part of him knew the man he had become was already beginning to die.



## seven

The Explorers stopped for a light lunch consisting of dry, bitter fruit and an inadequate sip of water each. Whatever had happened to Finbarr and the others, they had not taken any supplies with them when they disappeared, not even any water. Although that meant a greater share for the six remaining abductees, Katherine's cautious advice was to continue with the rationing.

Simon said nothing.

After lunch, they continued forcing their way through the jungle. The overgrown undergrowth was uneven but without many defining characteristics beyond the eclectic variety of trees, flowers and shrubs. They travelled mostly in silence although a few conversations sparked into life along the way. Comments on the weather, anecdotes from their past, shared words uniting the survivors.

Simon said nothing.

The highlight of the day came a few hours after lunch when JC tripped over something sticking out of the ground. Curious, the young rapper scrambled to his feet then dug out a scorched sheet of metal about a metre wide. Bland metal rusted from a deep shade of red, dented and decaying at the edges. No markings, no distinguishing features, no apparent signs of what it could be.

'Seems like discarded junk to me,' Tom remarked, vaguely interested.

'It has to be something,' Liz retorted, 'or it could be, you know, a little piece of something bigger.'

'My dear,' Sebastian scoffed in his familiar, ignorant tones, 'it does appear to be nothing more than discarded junk, as Mr Kennedy has commented.'

'Hey,' JC reacted defensively, 'it could be something, right? Square pieces of metal don't just grow out of the ground, do they?'

‘Neither do chamber beds or weird leather laboratories,’ Katherine sighed reluctantly, ‘but it does look like a useless piece of scrap.’

Simon said nothing.

His preoccupied mind was racing.

*Civvies don't understand the burden of command, the drill sergeant kept repeating, because they don't have the same mentality. They live easy lives in comfort while warriors like you keep them safe. They don't understand what it takes to be a leader so don't pay the Brit any attention that her pathetic, misinformed statements hardly deserve.*

Katherine's words repeated on him throughout the day.

If he was back at home, he would be coming up on his tenth year serving with the United States Armed Forces. As soon as he had finished his schooling (after being forced to re-sit a year, admittedly), he applied for military service and devoted every day since to serving his country. There had only been one personal goal he had set himself in his career.

To lead men into battle.

Ten years of toil and sacrifice had only taken him as far up the military scale as Sergeant. Lesser men were commanding their own regiments in less time but he had struggled to progress through the ranks. He bluffed his way through the early years as a Private and spent a year as Corporal before his shock promotion just six months prior to his abduction. Life as a buck Sergeant had been challenging.

*Because being in command of men is a different challenge. Damn it, Soldier, why do you think you're put through all the tests and trials the Marine Corps presents? Fun? It's to prove to everyone, including yourself, that you're man enough to take responsibility for the lives of others.*

‘*Semper fidelis...*’

‘What did you say?’

He was unaware he had even spoken aloud until Katherine, who had overheard his mumblings, interrupted his rambling thoughts.

‘Nothing.’

He sensed the journalist struggle with her confusion as she tried to find a way to break the ice. She was just as aware that he had barely said a word since she had laid the blunt truth about his leadership style on him. It had been like introducing flesh-eating bacteria to fresh meat and watching it slowly disintegrate.

Simon pushed his legs harder, opening up a gap between them without appearing to run away.

*Why is this eating you up, Soldier? What does it matter if this woman openly questions your ability to lead this group? You're trained for this, you're better prepared for this situation than any of them.*

The truth was simple; it was not the situation causing him trouble. Even though it was an extraordinary situation the military never even considered preparing him for, it had offered few actual threats so far. If it was just the uncertainty of their predicament, he could have dealt with it easily enough.

What made this situation challenging for Sergeant Grady was the people.

*You see, he suddenly found his own voice inside his head, soldiers are easy to deal with. They're mostly like-minded men with similar skills and abilities, they share a common goal with their commander and they all work to the same code of conduct in everything they do. It's a generalisation but broadly true.*

*So you're saying civvies are different?*

*Yes, Sir. They have different motivations, different breaking points, different values. Here, they all have different backgrounds and some even have a fundamentally different knowledge base. Look at JC and Sebastian; the needs of one are vastly different to the needs of the other.*

*So what do you suggest, Soldier?*

That question kept him silent until they stopped to make camp.

The suns had not made many appearances throughout the day apart from occasional breaks in the overhanging ceiling of branches. Sunset was already turning the world a shade of orange when Simon called a halt to their procession. It had been a long, hard trudge across difficult terrain in close conditions.

'Let's stop here.'

Having taken point, Simon turned as he raised his right fist in a weary signal to halt. The spot he had chosen was mostly flat with a circle of heavy oaks providing a suitable perimeter. The five civilians who had followed him for eighteen hours of strenuous hiking sighed in near-perfect union.

He watched each of them lower their packs to the floor then collapse with a chorus of relieved sighs. Five exhausted, nervous individuals spanning hundreds of years of history with as much diversity as you could throw a political correctness training video at and every one of

them quietly frightened. The thoughts that had preoccupied his trek replayed in a flash before he stepped forward to address them all.

‘We’ve made good progress, folks. It’s been a difficult day and I know you’re all tired but every step we’ve taken is a step closer to home. You...you should all be proud of yourselves.’

Everyone stared up at him; Katherine was not the only one that appeared surprised. Whether it was his words or the tender manner in which he delivered them, he did not get the chance to reflect on their shock. Neither did he reflect on how much he was beginning to sound like Gareth Oakley.

‘I know we’ve had a tough couple of days, all of us. I really wish I could give you the reward of some certainty that the way home ain’t far away but I can’t honestly do that. There is one thing I can do.’

He paused, realising that he was once more standing to attention with his hands clasped behind his back. Slowly, as if testing himself, he relaxed and kneeled in the dirt beside the rest of the Explorers.

*Down at their level, Soldier? Let’s see how that plays out.*

‘There’s a saying in the Marines; *Semper fidelis*. I think it’s Latin or Greek or something. It means “always faithful” and it’s like our official motto.’

His captivated audience listened while he pushed onwards, sweating more from the strain of his speech than the dusk-tinted humidity.

‘I want the six of us to make a promise. A special pact, if you want. I want us to promise each other that we’ll continue being faithful to each other. We’ll support each other, we’ll believe in each other and we won’t leave anyone behind. One promise covers it all.’

The others shared subtle glances but he could not read their expressions. Except Katherine’s. The journalist looked somewhere between happy and content. There was a subtle difference between the two but that expression conveyed that those emotions were blending into one.

*She’s happy that you’re listening*, the drill sergeant almost sounded disgusted, *and she’s content with what you’re saying*.

‘I promise,’ she smiled, her words strained slightly.

JC nodded at her side. ‘Yeah, me too. I promise.’

‘I promise,’ Liz added softly.

Sebastian, though obviously exhausted, nodded enthusiastically. ‘I promise as well.’

Tom paused, his face unreadable. Simon could recall the words Gareth had delivered to the convict just after freeing him from his shackles. It was the sentiment of a leader offering a second chance, an opportunity to prove his worth. The convict was suddenly in a position where that opportunity had to be validated; the faith placed in him was being tested.

‘I promise.’

It was an emotional moment between the six survivors. Simon could almost feel the imaginary drill sergeant in his mind retreating deeper into his subconscious to fight another day.



## eight

With humidity as thick as smog even as night descended, Liz pulled her purple strap top over her head. Between the sweat and grime that had accumulated since leaving the facility, her cheapest possession of clothing had started to stink. She shook it dry with loose bits of dirt and grass falling away.

She gazed into the jungle, a picturesque procession of plants and trees like the cover of a rainforest postcard. Unlike the grey path they had followed from the facility to the river, there was no straight line driving through the heart of the jungle. It was a steady uphill shimmy through the undergrowth in a vague direction towards the unclear promise of a single glint of light.

Alone for the first time all day, she drew in a deep breath of jungle air. Compared to the icy winds of Canada, this place was a tropical paradise. Memories of happy childhood holidays paled in comparison. Even as night descended, the air felt refreshing on her bare skin.

‘Liz, do you...’

She glanced over her shoulder just as JC burst through the private enclosure she had found not far from camp. When he realised she was topless, he froze with one foot in mid-air.

Shielding her breasts, she turned to fix his eyes. They were as wide as his gaping mouth. ‘Yes?’

*Well, he’s not the first horny kid to get lost in the appeal of this body. If it weren’t for drooling guys like JC, I’d either be on the streets or in a morgue.*

‘I was...’ he stalled as, with considerable effort on his part, he closed his mouth. ‘Sorry. I was just, you know...wondering if you wanted your rations?’

‘What’s on the menu?’ she asked as she put her top on again.

‘Well, we got one slightly dry shit-stick with a drop of water, half a funny tasting plum with a side of water or a delightful berry platter with...oh yes, a sip of water.’

‘I think I’ll wait for the dessert menu, thanks.’

He laughed with more than a hint of awkwardness in his voice.

*He’s cute*, she thought as she crossed towards him, *but he’s just a boy*.

It was a ridiculous reason to fight off the completely natural feelings of attraction Liz was beginning to feel. JC was about the same age as her, he was handsome and there was plenty of appealing personality there. The truth was more complex than that.

*The truth is that he represents the kind of person you used to be. Sweet, innocent, has a decent dream he’s trying to follow. A nice guy. You don’t do nice guys, do you? Not unless they pay well, which would void their claims to being nice guys.*

Life on the streets was not suited to nice people. Anybody with a conscience would not survive long amongst the drug dealers, whores and violent drunks. Someone like JC, with dreams of superstardom and pleasant charms, would be dead in days if he stepped into the life she knew.

So what were the chances he could survive the harsh reality of life in the wilderness of an alien jungle?

A sudden chill washed over her. Despite the heat, its cold touch tingled through her body for an instant, causing her to shiver and wrap her arms together. Before JC noticed, she followed through with a casual sigh and crossed to his side.

‘Do you think we’ll ever get out of this jungle?’

He glanced across to check she was fully clothed before stammering into a reply. ‘W-w-well, that glint of light can’t be too far. Maybe a couple of days if we keep up this pace.’

‘But what about the way back to Earth? Will we ever get home?’

She watched JC stumble with his doubts, churning over the worries in his mind. After almost a minute of wordlessly failing her test, he shrugged his shoulders just as the last sparkle of daylight faded away.

*It’s not just that he doesn’t know*, she sighed to herself. *He doesn’t believe it. We all need belief to give us the strength to survive and if he doesn’t, he won’t.*

She gazed into the jungle, an unending undergrowth of shadows that created impenetrable walls through which the dying light could barely



pierce. As a suddenly cloudy chill replaced the warm kiss of evening, Liz felt her own faith desert her as she gazed into the dusk-coloured land ahead.

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A storm swept over the Explorers as they made camp for the night, harsh weather blown down from the north. The group settled against its brute force for the night but the melodic patter of rain against leaf played percussion to the night symphony.

At midnight, Tom Kennedy stood beneath the tumultuous rainstorm and reminisced about his old life.

Not the life on the penal colony in New South Wales where, under the pretence of serving the British Empire, he was forced to work for the authorities. Toiling eighteen hours a day to the brink of exhaustion, flogged brutally for minor indiscretions, dreaming of pardons that would set him free with good behaviour. Of the thousands shipped around the globe in captivity, many died before their time.

Not the life he had lived until he was twenty-four. Working in a factory from the age of five, even more frequent beatings surrounded yet more toil, death and injustice. He once watched a six-year-old girl he had been known well have her hair cruelly cut from her skull just for talking to him. The intense viciousness of the industrial revolution had left young Thomas Franklin Kennedy a scarred, scared child.

Not those lives.

The life he was reminiscing about as he kept watch was his life as a married man.

In 1780, he married the perfect woman. In 1784, he had found the perfect woman in the bed of another man. The four years between had been the closest to bliss Tom had ever known and he could still not say for sure whether the incarceration and slavery he had endured since were worth those years of happiness.

As the memory overwhelmed his restraint, he kicked the ground in frustration. His feet smashed into the muddy soil, sending soggy dirt and stone flying up into the air. One pebble bounced off the cheek of one of the sleeping abductees.

Liz Stockton awoke with a start and her hands shot upwards in shock, feeling for something. Tom watched guessing that her semi-conscious grasping was checking for the presence of a domed chamber. When she

looked up, her eyes adjusted slowly to the darkness until she noticed him staring back.

‘Tom?’

‘Easy, Elizabeth,’ he whispered softly, ‘a bird landed near your face. The flutter of his wings disturbed your sleep.’

Frowning, she pushed rainwater off her face and sat up within her nook beneath a tree. The flickering flame from the sheltered fire caught her features with a glow that lit up the jungle.

‘Bad dreams?’

She frowned wearily through the rain. ‘No, just...I dreamt I was lost in the jungle and someone was chasing me.’

He tried to keep his smile subtle. ‘In the colony, I was once bitten by a venomous snake native to the land. I lay in a fever for days and my dreams at that time involved the snake chasing me through the desert. I would always wake up just as the creature sunk its teeth.’

Liz’s gaze lingered on him for an instant before she stretched, rubbing her eyes.

Tom had seen that look before many times. Uncertainty. She was unsure about the kind of man he was, the kind of human being he was. With almost a fifth of the people in the penal colony being women, he had noticed that gaze following him before.

Only this young lady from a distant time could not even comprehend what he was capable of.

‘Why not get back to sleep, Elizabeth?’

She sighed tiredly, more than the early hours seemed to warrant. ‘I don’t...’

‘Do not fret about your nightmares. I am here; nothing will harm you.’

This time, her expression changed slightly. Fatigue still dominated but there was something else behind the doubt and tiredness.

‘Thanks, Tom,’ she smiled softly before nestling back to sleep, huddled against the storm.

He watched her fall asleep and considered how much the young whore reminded him of his wife. The same subtle figure, the same glow, the same seductive intoxication like a sensual drug. This one had less grace, perhaps. A rougher edge to her...

*Do not lose focus,* he admonished himself.

Tom relaxed as he sat beside the fire. Yes, he needed to keep his focus because Liz Stockton was not the victim of his game. She was simply the tool he would use for his pleasure.

Even as the thought entered his mind, a sudden noise interrupted it. A deep boom exploded in the sky above the canopy of branches, somewhere to the south. Tom strained his eyes to see through the gaps in the leaves even as the others snapped out of their slumber. What he saw stopped his mind cold.

In the distance, a streak of orange light pierced the blackest clouds, blazed across the heavens and disappeared beyond the trees. Seconds later, a deep rumble shook the ground.



## nine

Talk of lights in the sky dominated the Explorer's breakfast (what little there was of it) but nobody could offer a practical explanation. There were plenty of theories but JC had heard enough theories for one lifetime (what little there was of it left). Theories about the abduction, the two suns, the aliens who had taken them, the laboratory, the disappearance of Finbarr and the others...

*Nobody's got any answers, though*, he mused as he listened to the others discussing the incident in the middle of the night.

'I swear it,' Tom was adamantly defending his account of the incident, 'there was a deep sound of thunder followed by an orange light that flew across the sky like a bird then a rumble towards the south that seemed to shake the trees.'

'What do you think it was, then?' Simon was questioning, scrutinising the unfortunate convict (a combination of words JC had never considered before).

'By the Heavens, I do not know. It happened so swiftly I had no time to gather myself.'

'Sounds like something flying,' Katherine pondered aloud. 'Or falling. Or landing.'

'Or dancing the Sugar Plum Fairy,' Simon snapped sarcastically, 'doesn't answer the question, does it?'

Everyone paused as the marine visibly adjusted his attitude. He blinked slowly, sipped in a breath through pursed lips before offering an apology to the British journalist. After that, the group uncomfortably ended the debate by surmising that whatever it was, it posed no immediate danger.

They collected their meagre possessions and continued with their journey. The night had been restless regardless of the lights in the sky

(noises and movements indicated more wildlife the deeper they delved into the jungle). The ground took an uphill incline made more challenging by the unbearable heat (JC had to guess it was somewhere in the high nineties). The procession was mostly silent.

The only person who seemed to have a need to talk was Sebastian Edwards.

‘What else? Why yes, in my time there is a great German philosopher called Nietzsche. It was my privilege to acquire one of his published works at a bookstore close to...’

JC rolled his eyes. ‘You don’t dig that philosophy crap, do you?’

Sebastian huffed slightly, pulling the bottom of his waistcoat neatly into place. ‘If you mean to ask whether I respect the philosophical musings of some of the greatest men of my age, I most certainly do. What, prey tell, is there in 1999 that may educate and entertain a man?’

He had to stretch his brain to think of an appropriate response. ‘We go to the movies, video games, concerts...paintballing.’

When he noticed Sebastian’s flummoxed expression, he shook his head to signal that it did not matter.

‘Yo, you should check out my hood on a Saturday. Nothing going down but skaters ripping up the parks and the occasional jacking.’

‘What the Devil might “jacking” be?’

‘Jacking? It’s...when someone steals a car that don’t belong to them.’

The banker’s mouth fell open. ‘And this is what your society classes as entertainment? My dear boy, it sounds like your world is one ravaged with decadent sin and crime.’

JC’s head dipped at the ruthless yet honest assessment of the world he knew. Sebastian may have come from a time when morality and etiquette were more essential life qualities but he still knew enough of his time to realise that his life was not a good one. No matter who said it, his life was sin and crime.

*Maybe if I had been stronger, I could’ve fought it, he sighed to himself. Maybe if I had the courage to stand up to the sins around me, Marcus would still be alive.*

He could not continue carrying the blame for his brother’s death. It was too heavy to carry forever, it had already taken a toll on his life by holding him back from his dreams of being a rap superstar. Two years of unbearable grief had delayed his destiny to become the “brightest star in the music industry” sky.

‘JC? Are you all right, dear boy?’

He glanced up and attempted a smile. The banker sounded concerned and the way he called him “boy” carried no malice, no contempt, no racial undertones.

‘Yeah. Good call, Seb.’

He turned away, not wanting to continue the cultural exchange Sebastian had started. His eye caught Liz a few paces ahead of him.

The sun had pierced the blanket of branches just enough to illuminate the hot Canadian and JC was captivated by her appearance. For the first time, though, it was not her beauty that caught his attention.

Despite the unbearable heat, Liz had her arms folded tightly in a huddle. She walked with a quiver, her legs wobbling as they navigated uneven ground. Her skin glistened with sweat but in the golden sunshine it looked pallid and clammy. Her eyes, which he caught a glimpse of when she turned her head, were distant and heavy.

*She looks sick*, he thought in shock.

There was definitely something wrong with the young woman following the others ahead of her with an aimless amble. Thinking back to the paleness he had noticed when Gareth freed her from the electrified chamber, she looked like she was suffering a relapse of that condition.

*Think what she’s been through*, Marcus’ voice broke through his subconscious barriers, *and tell me you can’t understand why she’s looking so unhealthy. The chamber, the river, a week of no real food or water or comfort...you probably all look like shit-sticks.*

But there was something more...

‘Are you listening to me?’

He looked up but nobody else was talking. The words were an echo of his memory of two years ago. The incident that had led to his brother’s death.

‘I heard you, all right,’ JC had huffed as he sat in the passenger seat of the old Buick. The sun had set on El Segundo hours ago and there was a cold chill on the LA breeze. Marcus, in the driver’s seat, had one hand on the steering wheel and was staring at him with an intense gaze filled with impatience.

‘Then what’s your answer?’

JC, barely eighteen at the time, had been unable to fix his older brother’s gaze. Marcus had always made him feel small and insignificant

at his side. There was love there, always, but there was also reluctance. The only reason for love between them was because they were brothers.

‘I can’t do it, Marcus. I...I just can’t.’

Marcus had not said anything for a while. Eventually he sighed. ‘Man, I can’t go on like this with you. You’ve been nothing but a disappointment since you was born.’

JC had said nothing. Marcus, a foot taller and a good degree better looking, had always been the better brother. More talented at sports, more popular with the girls, more comfortable in social situations. He had been the bar Justin had never reached.

With shadows distorting his expression, Marcus leant across the car, opened the passenger door and pushed it open with venomous force.

‘Get out!’

JC looked at his brother but the shadows twisted the face staring back at him. If he could have seen Marcus’ expression, it would have been brimming over with rage. Crying inside, he had climbed out of the car and watched from the snow as Marcus slammed the door shut then sped away into the night.

‘Hey,’ Simon’s voice filtered back through the jungle from further ahead, ‘everyone come see this.’

JC snapped out of the memory of the last time he had seen his brother alive. Sebastian frowned across at him before they both started jogging in the direction of the marine’s voice. As he reached Liz’s side, JC slowed to match her own stumbling pace.

‘You okay?’

She glanced up at him. ‘Yeah.’

It was a brief glance. It was an unconvincing answer. It was a cold response all round.

*What do you expect, dog? This fine woman ain’t going to be interested in a chump from the hoods in a million years and she certainly ain’t interested in your pity. Let her suffer in peace and stop bothering her.*

JC did not have the opportunity to respond to the hateful voice inside his head. They broke through a patch of overhanging branches and emerged in an open field. It was the first time since they had left the river that the jungle had not been encroaching on them from all sides. A wide green meadow stretched out in a sliver that cut a swathe through the jungle into the distance eastward and westward.



‘Where are we?’ he asked.

No answer came.

When he followed the gaze of the others, all questions were silenced.

The field was vast and unending but it was not empty. Stretching in either direction were mounds of dirt. Rows and rows...no, circles, ever decreasing circles of dirt piled a few feet in length. Dozens and dozens of circles, hundred and hundreds of mounds.

Katherine was the first to give this sight a name. ‘It’s a graveyard.’



## ten

Simon knelt beside one of the graves and reached tentatively towards the dead, grey mound. His fingers grazed the soil; the grave felt cold.

He closed his eyes and sighed.

In his mind, his fingers were caressing the fabric of an American flag draped over the steel coffin of a dead soldier. His hand moved over the lid covering the brave, uniformed corpse inside. Another soul was about to be given an honourable service, a mark of respect for a courageous warrior killed in action.

When he opened his eyes, all he saw was a lifeless lump of dirt.

‘What makes you think they’re graves?’ JC asked cautiously from behind him.

Katherine answered because she had been the first to voice the notion. ‘Well, if we assume the aliens honour their dead by burying them, it makes sense. They’re arranged in the same circular patterns as the chambers at the facility. Besides, there does seem to be a sense of serenity in this field.’

‘They’re graves, all right,’ Simon whispered.

He was not sure how or why he knew. The touch of the soil was hardly definitive and there were no markings or signs around the mounds. But, somehow, the marine knew unequivocally that bodies were buried under these sombre little heaps.

*Let’s give these aliens some credit, Sergeant. They must possess an advanced society to be able to travel across the galaxy and pluck twenty-five hapless souls from Earth then freeze them for hundreds of years in some sort of cryophonic chamber. Perhaps we should respect this civilisation if they were advanced enough to travel through time yet could still find a nice open area to honour their dead.*

‘Fine,’ JC sounded upset but it barely registered with Simon, ‘the next question then is why there are hundreds of unmarked graves in the middle of the jungle?’

Sebastian sounded almost optimistic in his response. ‘Don’t you see? This is the first sign of civilisation we have discovered since leaving the facility, a certain indication we are indeed on the right path.’

‘We should dig one up.’

Simon sensed everybody staring at him with identical expressions of confusion and disgust. Yes, he had just said that. Katherine, again, was first to question him.

‘Are you serious? We can’t just dig up the remains of...’

‘We need information,’ he interrupted coldly, ‘we’ve been on this planet a week now and we still don’t know who took us, why, how...I’m tired of being in the dark about the people who abducted us. Let’s dig one up and find out who we’re dealing with.’

*That’s more like the soldier you were trained to be; know your enemy. The creatures buried beneath your feet are the first clue to finding a way home and the discomfort of these civilians should not be allowed to interfere with that objective.*

‘Simon,’ Katherine was practically whispering from her shock, ‘we can’t.’

Simon glanced around the field. The jungle was emphatically separated by this solemn necropolis and not even a stray vine or overzealous branch was encroaching on this solemn graveyard. Unmarked graves stretched as far as he could see. His inadequate imagination even considered whether this straight line of death circled the planet like an equator of remembrance.

*You should respect these aliens,* the drill sergeant’s voice dropped to a solemn tone. *If you don’t respect your enemy, you’ve lost the war already.*

He held a hand to his head and closed his eyes. He had avoided making the gesture for days, since he had woken up in that damned alien chamber with a headache he blamed on the explosion that had ended his last moments on planet Earth. Such a gesture would be seen as a sign of weakness, one he did not want to be associated with in front of others.

‘Hey,’ Liz interrupted his fractured thoughts, ‘what are those?’

She pointed a surprisingly bony finger towards the far side of the field and the other five followed the direction she was pointing.

Each circle of graves sat inside a larger circle that sat inside a larger circle and so on until the largest possible circles reached from one side of the field to the other. A gap was left between the curves of the larger circles and between each of these gaps on the south side of the field stood a series of monuments.

The identical monuments were impressive structures standing over twenty feet tall, level with the tops of the trees. Constructed of the same pale stone as the bridge outside the facility, each monument sparkled in the sunlight. Smooth needles of hexagonal shapes pointing towards the two suns overhead.

Simon leapt up and ran across the field towards the nearest needle, the others soon following.

They crossed the silent cemetery ducking between graves before arriving at the base of the monument. The others followed, weary from the long haul and not as conditioned as the marine. Simon stood motionless, staring up at the peak as they rolled up to his side.

‘Simon,’ Katherine panted, ‘what’s wrong?’

‘Nothing,’ he muttered without taking his gaze from the summit of the monument.

‘Then...why were we...just running?’

‘I don’t know.’

The others gathered around him. The smaller sun sat above the peak of the needle and some of the Explorers had to shield their eyes to see it.

‘What is it?’ It was the bank manager from London who asked the question. Nobody had an answer.

‘Maybe,’ Katherine started slowly, unsure what her answer would be, ‘they’re like signposts. Imagine trying to find a single grave in place this big...well, this long. Perhaps these are markers of some sort?’

JC nodded slowly, his eyes signalling that he understood. ‘I get you; they’re like mass gravestones or something.’

‘That’s what I think. Although if this is a cemetery, where did the bodies live before they were buried in the ground? And if they are gravestones...’

Katherine suddenly started striding around the monument, scanning the surface of the stone. She disappeared around the corner and a few seconds later called for the others to follow her. As the Explorers turned the corner, the journalist was standing between the jungle wall and the monument.

‘Look at this,’ she pointed up at the south-facing side.

The stone had been smooth and unblemished on the other five slopping surfaces. The sixth side was almost identical except for the markings. About a foot off the ground, a series of etched icons ran in nine rows of nine. Familiar icons.

Identical icons to the marks they had discovered back in the facility.

Some were just incomprehensible scrawls in the stonework. Others were familiar patterns or complex combinations of shapes and lines. One looked like a crucifix overlaid with a crescent moon. Eighty one symbols both familiar and alien to the Explorers. Behind each symbol was a vast circle vaguely reminiscent of the sun.

‘Jesus,’ JC murmured, ‘I guess there’s no doubting who built these things; the same aliens who abducted us and left us to die. Seem a bit loco about the moon, don’t they?’

Simon was oblivious to his feet pulling him towards the engravings and his hands reaching up to caress the indentations in the stone.

‘Simon, are you well?’

He ignored Sebastian’s concerned words as his fingers embraced the cold stone. A tingle slipped through his arm and down his back. The breath in his lungs waited patiently for an exhale he had forgotten about as he absorbed the presence of the monument.

‘It’s a memorial,’ he whispered absently, ‘a testament to the creatures rotting in the ground. This is an epitaph to their memory.’

Silence filled the world and awkwardness filled the silence. The marine was mesmerised and did not notice the nervous glances exchanged between the others. Even as Katherine tip-toed to his side, his eyes followed the line in every indentation in the icons.

*It’s glorious,* he thought without a trace of the drill sergeant occupying his mind, *magnificent beyond description. I’m captivated by this structure and I have no idea why.*

‘Simon,’ Katherine whispered, ‘what makes you so sure it’s a memorial?’

He snapped out of his reverie and fixed her with a frown. ‘Well, it says so right here.’

When he pointed at the inscription, the confusion that spread across the journalist’s face in turn confused him. Their eyes met with both searching for understanding.

‘What?’

‘What?’

Katherine turned from Simon to the inscription then back to Simon. ‘How can you tell?’

His frown faded to frustration. ‘Damn it, Kath, I ain’t no dummy. My schooling wasn’t up to much but I can still read basic English.’

‘What do you mean? The bloody thing’s nothing more than incomprehensible scribbles. Nobody can read that mess.’

Simon’s huffed before stepping up to the stone and pointing to the symbols etched on the wall.

‘It says “Where we came from is stardust, where we go to is destiny, our kin lay in the heart of life, recalled by fate with honour, let their sacrifices lead to victory, let their parting still us, when stardust meets our destiny, the chosen shall rise for us, we stand unified against the flame”...what’s so freaking hard about that?’

He turned into five identical expressions of disbelief staring back at him. The Explorers were gaping at their leader as though he had two heads.





## eleven

Biting fingernails had become a familiar habit to one Elizabeth Marie Stockton. After two years of poverty, drug addiction and prostitution, she could not remember the last time her fingers were finely manicured. She had almost reached the bone watching the latest “nail-biting” drama unfolding before her.

‘Look, I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Simon yelled for the third time, ‘the damn thing’s written in English.’

‘For you,’ Katherine was fighting against raising her own voice, ‘but the rest of us can only see those crazy symbols. Why is it you can see something different to the rest of us?’

The marine glanced from the faces surrounding him to the carved inscriptions then back again. ‘I...’

Two years ago, Liz would have been sharp enough to realise that Simon Grady did not have a clue about anything. The marine had been making things up as he went along since the first day of this nightmare and this latest mystery was just another bump in the road that he was struggling to get over. His flaws and constraints would have been obvious to the old Elizabeth Marie Stockton.

Not this Elizabeth Marie Stockton.

‘You can’t explain it, can you?’ Katherine pushed Simon.

There was a long pause before the response came. ‘I can’t. I know I couldn’t read those symbols back in the facility...but all I can see on the stone are English words.’

‘So what if he can read these words,’ Sebastian interjected, ‘when it’s meaning is nothing more than an epitaph for these creatures? How does that influence our next action? Can one of you tell me that?’

Mumblings amongst the group were silenced when the journalist directly asked Simon, ‘Do you still want to dig these creatures up?’

Simon hesitated, as did everyone else waiting for his reaction. He glanced back at the inscription, appeared to read it again then fixed Katherine's eyes. 'No. Leave them in peace.'

While the marine and the journalist continued discussing his apparent ability to translate the alien inscription, Liz managed to take a few casual steps away from the group. All attention was rigidly focused on either the monument or the argument, which allowed her to grimace at the excruciating pain in her stomach.

The pain was vicious like the first ripple of a convulsion. It seemed to shred her stomach and course through her veins like tiny shards of glass. She clutched her stomach and prayed the agony would dissipate before anyone noticed.

What had she been thinking when she decided to leave the facility? Why did she believe traipsing through the jungle was a better option than staying with the others, who were probably back home already? When was the precise moment she had forgotten about the addiction that ruined her life and the effect its absence was destined to have on her fragile body?

'I know that look.'

She turned with a fright at the sound of someone behind her. The only hope she carried as she turned was that it was JC who had noticed her pain. His heart was in the right place even though he had been blind to the pain she had been enduring since leaving the facility. Although he was evidently oblivious to the harshness of life she had endured, at least she could confide in the wannabe rapper.

Her voice abandoned her when she realised it was Tom Kennedy addressing her.

'I have seen that same expression on kin and kind,' the convict spoke in a low, serious tone, 'though I confess to never having seen it on the face of one so young. Many have heard how the poisons of the Far East infest men in many countries but I have witnessed with my own eyes hardy men succumb to opium. It is an evil that pollutes anyone who embraces it.'

Her mouth gaped and a denial floated beyond her grasp. The savage convict sounded like he was about to lecture her about drug addiction based solely on his experiences in the eighteenth century.

Her shock increased when he smiled softly and placed a hand delicately on her shoulder. 'Elizabeth, if it is your wish then your secret is safe with me.'

A frown pushed through her numb features. ‘W-w-why?’

‘Because I only want to help you.’

She had known keeping her secret would not be possible if the withdrawal symptoms took hold. Her heart thumped faster, skipping the occasional beat as unbearable heat and toil tested her limits. Depression had been gnawing at her for days and the agony was likely to explode inside her sooner rather than later. Undoubtedly, she needed help.

*I’ve needed help since I left home. Where was help when I sunk that first needle in my arm? Where was help the first night I allowed a man the pleasure of my body for a fraction of its worth? Where was help when my first pimp beat two teeth out of me because he thought I was holding back part of his payment?*

‘Why do you want to help me?’ Her emphasis on “you” was unfortunate but honest.

Tom glanced back at the others – still caught up in the debate, well out of earshot – before replying. ‘I understand how difficult this journey will be for you if you continue fighting this pain. It is hard to know who to trust when your vulnerabilities betray you, yes?’

‘What makes you think I trust you?’

‘Please do not misread my intentions, Elizabeth. I can offer little to ease your suffering. Neither can I cure your ails though I would wish I could. All you need know is that should you be in need, I am here in whatever capacity you deem appropriate.’

His antiquated words seemed genuine, his crooked smile seemed sincere. Even the tender touch on her shoulder seemed caring and considerate. Her eyes followed the line of his arm, flowing over a hardened bicep decorated in eccentric tattoos.

For the first time since she had met Tom Kennedy, Liz could see a different picture. This was not a brutish, unkempt criminal from a violent age. This was a strong, determined man surviving the worst of life’s challenges and suddenly demonstrating compassion under difficult circumstances. Whatever crimes he had committed, he had shown nothing to her so far but kindness.

And understanding.

*We’ve both been through rough times, she thought, trying to process the meaning behind his words, and he can see that too. He wants me to know I can count on him...and I think I can because he knows what it’s like to live a dangerous life like mine.*

Her eyes flickered across to where JC was staring at the argument raging between Katherine and Simon. A sweet kid in a baggy basketball vest, a naïve dreamer lost in an impossible situation.

Her eyes flickered back to Tom. A strong physique, chiselled jaw behind his wild mat of beard, shinning blue eyes dressed up with a worried expression intended for her. A man used to the harshness of life.

‘Thanks.’

It was all she could say but it was enough for him to gently remove his arm from her shoulder and return to the others. He glanced back with a smile she accepted through one of her own.

Two years ago, Liz would have been sharp enough to see that Tom Kennedy was playing on the emotions she could not hide because of her condition. The convict had manipulated everyone in the group since the first day of this nightmare and this latest act was just another opportunity to play his games. His intentions would have been obvious to the old Elizabeth Marie Stockton.

Not this Elizabeth Marie Stockton.

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When Liz looked up from Tom Kennedy’s embrace, JC quickly turned his gaze back to the raging argument.

He did not register any of the heated debate between the other Explorers. He did not put any significance in the grandness of the alien monument in front of him. He did not even form the chaotic concoction of emotions into a cogent thought.

All he could do was fight back the inexplicable tears battering down his emotional defences.

## twelve

The debate around the monument lasted almost an hour. All six remaining Explorers entertained numerous theories and disputes during that time. Many fears, doubts and trepidations were exposed as each individual experienced their own versions of anxiety at the prospect of what to do next.

With both suns burning brightly in the sky, Simon finally stepped forward to sum up the choices ahead of them.

‘We can’t stop at a cemetery forever,’ he addressed his troops. ‘Our supplies won’t last so we need to push on if there’s nothing here. We’ve gone too far to turn back and we only got one direction to go forward. I say we continue into the jungle looking for whatever made that glint of light.’

The faces staring back at him were riddled with fears, doubts and trepidations. Simon did not realise he was building up to something until he continued talking.

‘Now I really believe that light represents a beacon of hope for us all. Something’s out there and I damn sure want to believe whatever it is can get us home. I say we leave this depressing place and carry on with the mission. What do you say?’

The faces staring back at him changed, subtly at first but they all changed.

Within an hour, after a brief yet unsuccessful check along the borders of the jungle for food or anything of use or value, they proceeded along the compass bearing towards the glint of light.

The jungle was even denser the further south of the graveyard they travelled and the slope inclined to make their journey more of a challenge. Both suns were glaring down at them, hotter than ever, hotter still from the greenhouse effect created by the canopy of foliage. An

abundance of flying insects arrived to bother the weary travellers while the combination of hunger and fatigue troubled them all.

Simon was troubled by the voice inside his head.

*Do you realise what that little speech of yours signified, soldier? Any ideas? Do you realise who you're beginning to sound like?*

*Paten?*

*No, you idiot...you're beginning to sound like the teacher. He was capable of manipulating emotions of others to believe the unbelievable. You don't want to start sounding like Gareth Oakley, do you?*

*Why not?*

Simon even paused in his stride as he asked himself the question that a few days ago had seemed almost abhorrent.

*What do you mean, Sergeant? Are you suggesting the weedy Welsh wimp made a better leader because of his ability to quote chick-flick sentiments at every frightened fool in the group?*

*No, I mean he paid attention to others before acting. It's like waiting for the enemy to advance before making the tactical deployment. Know your enemy, right?*

The voice inside his head hesitated before replying. *It's not the same and you know it. Gareth played on people's fears, he...*

*No, he responded to them. Like when I could see the doubts in everybody's faces back there and I chose a course of action to resolve those doubts. If I had just opened my eyes a little, maybe I could have understood why so many of the others wanted to stay behind.*

Another one of the four-winged birds flashed across his path, snapping him out of his ambling thoughts. His hand flew to his holster but when he noticed the crazy creature landing on a brittle branch, he relaxed his grip on the handle of his gun.

'Relax, it's just another bird,' Katherine said at his side. 'Starting to feel like a proper jungle, right.'

'I'll take your word for it,' he replied.

Tensions between them had been difficult for days but the journalist was beginning to grow on him. She spoke her mind, not afraid of a challenge and there seemed to be little that fazed her. Despite her lack of leadership experience, she seemed to be coping well under such extraordinary circumstances.

‘So...’ she started, searching for the words she needed, ‘...any idea what’s going on with you? How come you can read the alien’s language all of a sudden?’

He wanted to give her more than just a shrug. ‘I don’t know, Kath. But I could honestly read that inscription.’

‘I believe you, Simon. I mean, you couldn’t just make up that little speech on the spot. It was beautiful, wasn’t it?’

He glanced at her with a raised eyebrow and when she realised what she had insinuated, her eyes sparkled with an apology.

‘Truth is, Kath, I have no idea what that was. I’m not denying what I saw but I can’t explain it either. If you’ve got any ideas then I’ll gladly listen, no matter how freaky they are.’

‘Sorry, I’m dry.’

He lowered his eyes to the ground ahead of him. Defeat was not an option for Sergeant Grady but this was something he could not fight, there was no way he could combat his confusion or outflank his fear.

‘Speaking of dry,’ Katherine lowered her voice to a whisper, ‘our supplies are running low. We’ve rationed really well but we can’t have more than three days of water left. If it rains again, we might be able to catch some fresh water but our food won’t last much longer either.’

He nodded, thinking hard. ‘What if we set camp early tonight and spend an hour searching for food...’

‘Simon...what happens if there’s nothing at this place we’re heading to?’

It was an honest question the journalist had no fear in voicing but Simon did not want to answer it. He had placed more than just his reputation on the prospect of a single beacon of light deep in an empty jungle. That light represented all the hope he could muster.

If there was nothing there, all hope disappeared.

‘Let’s get there first, shall we? A day or two more and we should reach the spot where that light was. After that...’

He trailed off. Sensing Katherine’s gaze gently prompting him, he met her eyes with the softest response he could manage.

‘...let’s cross that bridge if we come to it.’

‘A bridge would be a start.’

He laughed then laughed harder. Then Katherine started laughing. Then they were laughing together uncontrollably. When the others caught up with them, hysterical tears were streaming down their faces.

The trek continued gradually upwards through dense jungle foliage as the day progressed. The Explorers found different ways of passing the time. JC entertained Sebastian with a Dr Dre cover, improvising a few choice lyrics of his own. Tom passed the time snapping branches off trees they passed, in readiness for the evening's campfire. Simon was stopped from shooting one of the four-winged birds by Katherine and Liz doubled up in a coughing fit that brought forward the afternoon respite.

By the time the procession stopped for the evening, there was an air of contentment amongst them.

The marine was leaning against a misshapen oak and picking bits of shit-stick from his teeth. He had endured an inadequate and unsatisfying meal but his stomach was growing accustomed to rationing. When he turned to see Katherine smiling at him, he hurriedly pulled his finger out of his mouth.

‘Mind if I take first watch tonight?’

‘Sure, Kath. Any reason?’

She shrugged, knocking her flowing hair off her shoulders. ‘Just feeling wide awake right now, no sense trying to fight it so thought I’d put it to good use.’

‘Can I ask a question?’

Frowning, Katherine sidled up to him. ‘Anything.’

He needed a moment to verbalise a concern that had been following him from the graveyard. A concern that challenged everything he had trained for, everything his military experience represented. A concern his inner demons had been taunting him throughout the trek.

‘Did I make the right decision getting the group to leave the facility?’

Katherine needed a moment of her own to find an appropriate response. ‘We all believed the answers were out here somewhere. It wasn’t just your idea. Some of us would have left even if you didn’t.’

‘But I pushed it, didn’t I?’

‘Don’t carry that burden, Simon; we all want to go home.’

Simon nodded slowly, unable to meet her eyes. They were words he wanted (maybe even needed) to hear but he could not accept them. Days from thirst, starvation and death, he could not shake the notion that he was responsible for leading these innocent people on a hopeless quest.

Despite Katherine’s kind words, he knew that he was the reason they were all going to die lost in the depths of the alien jungle.



## thirteen

Midnight in the jungle was an eerie time. Since crossing the river, the array of animal and insect noises had increased, a chorus of clicks and whistles and buzzes and fluttering. The unseen moon unleashed grey rays of light over the unending sea of foliage. At the foot of a steep hillside, a single flickering fire seemed ironically alien amidst the shadows.

Liz awoke with a start, the bitter aftertaste of a nightmare sticking to the roof of her mouth. Poisonous thoughts and images had seeped into her dreams, turning them sour in her slumbering mind. One image brought enough terror to snap her out of sleep.

The angels in the water.

When her life had flashed before her eyes, Liz had not been surprised when there were few noteworthy clips on the pitiful highlight reel. There was no excuse; her background was reputable, her family supportive, her childhood pretty perfect. She had been the cause of her own downfall and drowning in an alien river was perhaps too good for her.

Only she had not died. Finbarr risked his life to rescue her; whatever had happened to him, she hoped he was safe and well. He was probably looking after the other missing Explorers, somewhere in the jungle. The hunky Irishman deserved better after saving her from death in a swirling brown river.

Where she had seen the angels.

*Maybe they weren't angels*, she thought, resting her head back down on her elbow, *I mean, it was murky in that river and I did pass out. What if I imagined them?*

They had been big enough to distinguish in the water. Maybe four feet long, dark blurs with wide wing-like expanses stretching behind them in the water. No other discernable limbs apart from a broad lump where she

would have expected a halo. With distorted light flickering through the water, she had noticed two clearly, possibly a third in the distance.

*Listen to yourself, you're chasing this thing like a Buckle Bunny. Swimming angels? Do you realise how crazy that sounds?*

Not wanting to argue with herself, Liz sat up and stretched out the crick in her neck. It was still dark in the little nook on the hillside where they had made camp. Too early. She needed to pee but for a moment, she just surveyed her surroundings.

Something was wrong.

The jungle air heavy with the first breath of yet another day in Hell. Her travelling companions were still asleep (a poor excuse for sleep was the best anyone hoped for) but she only counted four other bodies curled around the fire.

One was missing.

Liz jumped as a rustle in the jungle broke the silence. It came from down the hill behind a dense wall of trees back towards the facility they had abandoned far too readily in hindsight (an opinion she guessed was growing amongst the group). With nobody else seemingly ready to awaken, she got up to investigate.

Behind the trees, Tom Kennedy stood with his back to her, staring out over the rainforest they had been trekking across for a week. His head was tilted to one side and his arms crossed in a contemplative pose. His bulky, toned frame distracted her as she softly approached so that when her foot snapped a twig on the ground, she was as shocked as Tom.

'Mornin' darling,' he whispered, throwing a sizzling look back at her.

'I didn't mean to disturb you,' she whispered, turning to leave.

'Don't go.'

Liz found herself stopping, turning back. The convict sauntered towards her, nodding back in the direction he had been staring.

'Been thinking about this predicament,' he started, eyes fixing hers, 'and whether this journey will ever end. Walking for days, finding nothing, dying slowly. What does fate have in store for us this day or the one beyond that?'

'Do you believe in fate, Tom?'

*Why are you asking this man any questions? He's a killer, he was sent to the other side of the world for his crimes; small talk isn't going to get you anywhere.*

*He knows about my problem. I don't want him telling the others and making them all hate me. I couldn't bare it. They might not be as compassionate as Tom.*

*If he's truly compassionate, he won't tell anyone.*

Tom shrugged as he reached her side. 'Fate is a cruel mistress indeed if this farce is part of her design. We can only guess as to her intentions but this is the path ahead of us. I was just considering what else we may find on this journey.'

'Who knows, huh?'

'Still, perhaps it is better than most other ways of life. "When in captivity time goeth very slow but free as air to roam now quick the time doth go." Do you not agree?'

'I guess.' Her anxiety was palpable yet he seemingly chose to ignore it.

'What about you, Elizabeth? Do you believe in fate?'

Liz did not understand why she was answering his questions. 'Used to. When I was a girl, I thought my Daddy had my whole life planned out. Then I kind of rebelled against it and now look where I ended up. That's not fate, that's about choices and all I ever made was bad ones.'

'We can only make choices with the options presented to us.'

'No, sometimes you make your own bed and have to lie in it. Daddy used to say that a lot. I did this to myself, I ruined everything, I turned my life into a joke.'

Tom hesitated, uncertain. 'Elizabeth...'

'It's true, you know. It's all my fault I'm in this mess.'

From nowhere, tears suddenly battered down her defences and she began crying uncontrollably. She was tired, hungry, depressed and the pains in her stomach had hardly subsided overnight. It was too much for a nineteen year old prostitute kicking a heroin habit cold turkey in an inhospitable environment surrounded by strangers and death.

'Liz,' Tom motioned towards her, reaching out to touch her shoulder.

A normal, sensible woman would have recoiled at the embrace of a savage convict even if it was intended to comfort. A normal, sensible woman would never have let the brute's hand reach her shoulder. A normal, sensible woman would have walked away and wallowed in her own self-pity alone.

Liz met Tom's gaze, reached forward and kissed him.

It was more than just a kiss. She reached her tongue down his throat, she ruffled his shortly-shaved head, she leant into his ripped torso to feel his heat.

Elizabeth Marie Stockton was not a normal, sensible woman. Her mistakes went beyond forgetting birthdays or saying the wrong name in bed. She counted leaving home, taking drugs, submitting to her pimp for 'freebies' and letting her body become her only commodity amongst her mistakes. Kissing an eighteenth century murderer would not even make her Top Ten.

*Why not?* the weaker part of her mind argued. *He's fit, you need a fix, he's fit, you only feel anything when you're being used by men with strength and power...he's fit. It's a bit late to redeem yourself. Not even the angels can save you now.*

When Tom's hands began to roam across the curves of her body, she allowed it. When Tom's fingers began to hitch up her skirt, she allowed it. When Tom lifted her up against the trunk of a large oak, she allowed it. When he took the last shred of her innocence, she allowed it.

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Tom Kennedy enjoyed playing games and there was no sweeter victory than conquering the fragilities of a woman.

But this game was not about pleasure.

As he savoured Liz Stockton's body, he thought of his wife cavorting with her lover while Tom toiled in the dockyards to bring food to her table. That single image had been twisted during his incarceration, warped over the intolerable journey across the world and intensified by his slavery at the behest of the British Empire. The emotion it left was beyond anger or rage.

Its closest kin was vengeance.

He wanted others to feel what he had felt as his naïve love was shattered by the betrayal of his betrothed. He wanted another man to experience the bitter taste of a pure emotion turned sour at the whim of a weak woman. He wanted someone else to feel as bad as he did, only he wanted to be the cause of the same pain that plagued what was left of his miserable life.

And he did not care who suffered.

As he pinned the filthy whore against a tree, Tom was not aware how perfectly his demented plan had worked. Though he could not have

designed that moment better, the convict did not even notice JC Jackson emerge from the shadows, his worried expression melting into shock then horror then reluctant acceptance before he bled back into the darkness.



## fourteen

The following day was the quietest since the group had left the facility five days earlier. Simon was not aware of the early morning encounter between Liz and Tom; neither was he aware that the young rapper had stumbled upon them accidentally. In truth, even if he had known the marine probably would not have cared.

He was worried he was losing his mind.

His grandfather had succumbed to dementia when Simon was in his teens and it had been a difficult experience for Simon. Watching somebody he loved slowly losing their mind had distressed him, the effects had disturbed him. Memory loss, depression, mood swings, confusion...the day Simon watched his grandfather peeing absently whilst sitting on his favourite living room chair had been the worst of many bad days before the end.

Now it was happening to him too.

*There's got to be another explanation*, he mused as he led the silent procession up a steep incline. *I mean, I'm not even thirty-freaking-one yet. Maybe I really did die in the Middle East...no, damn it, there's got to be another explanation.*

What else could explain his sudden ability to read an alien language, never mind see it as plain English? Simon was not an overly imaginative man. His silence was the result of the concentration required to figure out what the Hell was going on.

*That's what Teacher would be doing under the same circumstances.*

For the first time, he wished Gareth Oakley was alongside him. The nerdy Welshman had proven himself to be innovative when faced with such riddles. Pride would never allow Simon to say it aloud, hence the uneasy silence.

‘Simon,’ Katherine called from back down the hillside, ‘come see this.’

He turned as the others did, looking for the journalist who had strayed from the path he had set. They had been steadily ascending the slope for hours but she was about ten feet to the East, staring up at a tree branch high above her head. When the others gathered around, one by one they saw what she had spotted.

The second branch from the top was broken.

‘What do you think did that?’ she asked.

‘I’m venturing a guess,’ Sebastian ventured, ‘the same thing that did that.’

He pointed to the next tree eastward where the third branch down was broken. Further away, another tree had been almost splintered in the middle, leaving a gaping hole in the bark. Further again, the entire top half of an oak was snapped and leaning across the ground like a discarded limb.

‘Looks like something fell here,’ Katherine suggested, following the trail of damage that seemed to descend at an angle through the jungle. ‘Or crashed.’

Suddenly, Simon started running in the direction of the trail.

He ignored Katherine’s call, he ignored the weary sighing as the others started chasing after him, he ignored the aching in his calves as he ran. Memories of the Gulf War flooded back as he recognised the entry path of a missile; whether it was breaking branches or puncturing buildings in a Middle Eastern mountain village, it was just as obvious to a trained soldier.

The impact crater was thirty yards from their path. He was crouching beside it as the others jogged up. Each of them fell silent once more.

‘What the Devil is this?’ Sebastian muttered breathlessly.

Simon doubted even Gareth would have any answers on this one.

The crater was deep, maybe ten feet and three times wider. The ground was scorched grey, not a blade of grass or a tree stump had survived the high-velocity impact. Judging by the angle of descent mapped out by the broken trees, it had fallen from the sky somewhere in the west. Judging by the impact, it had fallen from a great distance and judging by the scorched condition of the surrounding area, it had fallen only days ago.

*Then what precisely is it, Sergeant?*



‘What is it, Simon?’

He could not answer the journalist or the crazy drill-instructor voice in his head.

It was metal, he could tell that much. Cylindrical, three feet wide, two scorched pieces like long plates stacked on top of each other, cracked open in places. Beneath the cracks, he noticed residue lining the orange-tinted interior. The residue was green, tacky and dripped onto the ground in a luminescent puddle.

‘Simon?’

‘How should I know, Kath?’ he responded a few decibels below shouting.

The five Explorers stood motionless in a wide arch around the crash site, gazing at the small broken object in the ground. Yet another mysterious sideshow on the grand carnival road-trip through the undergrowth of an alien planet.

‘Well,’ Katherine started, keenest to break the silence, ‘it looks like it crashed here not too long ago. Maybe signs of civilisation after all.’

Tom took a turn. ‘Perchance this could be the glint of light we spied from the river?’

‘Perhaps,’ Sebastian shrugged, ‘although I thought we had a good deal further to travel. The light came from higher ground, so I thought.’

‘If indeed it is, Sebastian, then we may have just wasted a few days of hard toil.’

‘It’s not the light we saw.’

Simon sounded sure of himself but he did not know why. Kneeling beside the crater, he leant forward for a closer inspection. There was something unusually fascinating about the crashed device, a quality that enchanted the marine. Given that he had only ever been fascinated by girls, guns and monster trucks, it was a new sensation for Simon Grady.

‘Yeah,’ JC added, not recognising the significance in Simon’s actions, ‘it’s still kind of hidden behind all these other trees. I reckon you couldn’t see this spot from the hillside where we saw that light.’

‘Well, the casing looks like that metal fragment we picked up yesterday,’ Katherine added.

‘Maybe it broke off as it fell from the sky. Hey, maybe it fell from Santa’s sleigh for all I knows.’

‘What’s that goo inside?’ Liz asked another unanswerable question.

‘Biomechanism.’

This time everyone stared at the marine, each carrying the same question in their gaze. He looked between them, reading their expressions but suddenly running dry of answers.

‘I-I don’t know where that came from,’ he sighed.

‘Bio-mechaclysm?’ the young Canadian frowned.

‘Biomechanics,’ Katherine interjected, ‘is, if I remember correctly from Uni, some principle about biology acting mechanically. They did courses back in Cambridge about living organisms working like machines. What makes you think biomechanics, Simon?’

‘Yeah,’ JC added, ‘it’s just some dry green gloop, dog. Looks like Big Foot sneezed.’

‘I don’t know, all right,’ Simon yelled, this time unable to control his voice. The words echoed around the jungle and the others recoiled in unison.

*Look at the way they’re staring at you, soldier; they all know you’re losing it, it’s in their eyes. Reading alien text, guessing the significance of their graveyards, understanding the principles of their machines...it’s all just further signs of your continuing descent into insanity. You’re losing control, Sergeant. Control of the situation, control of these civvies, control of your mind.*

Feeling his head beginning to boil, he stood and strode back towards the path they had been following up the hill.

‘Where are you going?’ Katherine called after him.

‘Back to the path,’ he called without stopping, ‘I want to reach the summit of this hill by midday. There’s nothing here so we should keep moving. Come on, everyone. Fall out!’

What he could not say aloud was the damn certainty he felt that there was something very wrong about the crashed item, something out of place. Why that feeling of unease should be so prominent after all the crazy stuff he had seen actually frightened the marine so he turned his back to the crash site and started back towards the path.

One by one, the travellers fell in line behind the marine’s purposeful stride. They left the broken satellite in the scorched crater, not putting much thought into what the device was for, where it had come from and who had created it.

## fifteen

The overgrown hill was higher than any of the Explorers first realised. A few continued glancing over their shoulders expectantly as they climbed. Tension, exertion and savage heat combined to bring the weary travellers to the brink of exhaustion. Both suns were high overhead as they finally stopped for a poor excuse for a lunch break.

JC lowered himself gingerly against the base of a hefty tree trunk and slipped off his kicks (sweet new Nikes, half a week's wages being torn to shreds). Blisters had formed on the soles of his feet and the back of his ankles, a cluster of tender agony. He sighed deeply and tilted his head backward so a delicate breeze could tickle the sweat underneath his chin.

'Is it me or is there something different 'bout them suns?'

He asked the question aloud absently but jumped as Liz sat beside him and glanced up at the twin balls of light in the sky. 'You shouldn't stare at them, you know?'

The rapper lowered his gaze not out of worry for his eyesight. In truth, he had not been able to maintain eye contact with the Canadian since accidentally stumbling upon her getting freaky with Tom. Neither of them noticed JC slip into the sheltered clearing then bleed back into the shadows.

'W-why's that?'

'It'll damage your eyes, silly.'

'Oh...right.'

'Although there does seem to be something different up there.'

'Yeah, 's what I thought.'

'Hey...you okay?'

Instinct raised his head enough for a flicker of eye contact. In that moment, he recognised how tired Liz appeared. Her skin was taugt

beneath her eyes, that already thin body seemed to have lost twenty pounds since crossing the river and her head sat atop her neck like an orange balancing on a pencil. The trek had taken its toll on everyone but she seemed to be struggling more.

Despite his concern, JC could not maintain his gaze and returned to staring at the dirt. 'Just completely zonked, you dig? Damn blisters killing me.'

Maybe she was too tired to push him further, maybe she did not care enough, maybe her thoughts were distracted by memories of her night of passion with a murderer. Too many maybes. She sighed leaning back against the tree.

'I know that feeling. We must've walked fifty miles.'

'Feels like a hundred.'

'Or a thousand in heels.'

'Yeah...uh-huh.'

JC was not the smartest kid; he dropped out of high school a freshman, a foolish fifteen-year-old with a chip on his shoulders. Life since had been a blur of poverty-stricken adolescence, hormones fuelling ambitions beyond his capability and society imposing threats at various interludes. From basketballs rolling into a nest of gun-totting criminals around the hoops to hookers tempting him to betray his innocence for money he did not have, life was a dizzy stumble between failures and unrealistic dreams.

But he knew enough to understand that he had been falling for Liz Stockton.

*So what?* he thought. *I don't know this girl, we got nothing in common except both being abducted. The babe's so fine, what chance would I ever have with her in real life? Hot white girl in classy clothes, long legs, beautiful eyes. Way out of my league.*

'Everyone take some water,' Simon addressed the group while Katherine distributed the last few leaf cups, 'then rest half an hour before we get moving. I want to see what's on the other side of this hill.'

There was a collective groan from the other travellers. The marine either missed their frustration or chose to ignore it, turning instead to inspect the wall of oak trees that had been waiting for them on top of the hill. As the seated Explorers exchanged glances, JC noticed how Tom caught Liz's eye for an instant before she turned to accept her water.

That glance hurt JC. There was nothing to it, the look lasted barely a second. A smarter guy would have recognised that there was no heat or

passion in that look (if anything, Liz's expression contained a hint of loathing). All he could see was his own inadequacies.

'I'm a nothing.'

The words did not come out of his mouth but out of his memory. Two years earlier, a million miles away on the passenger seat of his brother's Buick in El Segundo.

'Don't say that, bro,' Marcus had answered, slapping his brother's knee with one hand as he steered the clapped-out old vehicle over to the side of West Holly Avenue.

The car slowed to a stop about three hundred yards from a busy section of shops; a hardware store, rival coffee shops on different sides of the street, a small-time arcade shimmering with blinking lights. Marcus pulled up the handbrake, his other hand resting on the steering wheel.

'I'm serious, man. I'm a dreamer, not a doer. I can't roll like you, I can't even get a girl to go out with me...'

'Listen,' Marcus lowered his voice, leaning towards him, 'if you don't harden up, bro, people will be walking over you the rest of your life. You need this score, J, you got to show those punks on the basketball court that you won't get bullied by anyone.'

'You're asking me to commit a crime,' JC fixed his brother's gaze with tears welling in his eyes.

'I'm helping you to stand up for yourself. When are you going to start taking a chance with girls or just acting like a man, you know? This is your chance; do yourself a favour and take it.'

That had hit JC hard at the time; he was not known for taking risks (just turning up for his audition at Eastlands Music was the biggest risk he had ever taken). Marcus wanted him to be getaway driver in a low-brow, petty cash robbery with a better chance of going wrong than right. He had not known at the time that his brother would be gunned down by the overly protective proprietor of the arcade.

'Are you listening to me?'

'I heard you, all right,' JC had huffed from the passenger seat, his words evaporating in the cold. His older brother, hours from death, stared at him with an intense gaze filled with impatience.

'Then what's your answer, dog?'

'I can't do it, Marcus. I...I just can't.'

'Man, I can't go on like this with you. You've been nothing but a disappointment since you was born.'

With the darkness hiding his expression, Marcus leant across the car, opened the passenger door and pushed him through it with venomous force. 'Get out!'

That had been the last time JC had seen his brother; two hours later, Marcus Jackson was gunned down in a futile attempt to hold up Dantes Arcadia for a few hundred dollars in small change. If Justin had been man enough to stand up for himself, maybe he could have saved his brother. If he was a man at all...

'JC?'

Katherine stood over him holding out the last cup of water and frowning at his distant expression.

JC glanced down at the cup then whispered, 'I'm not thirsty,' before pulling himself to his feet and striding off the path, deeper into the wilderness.

He was angry, an emotion he was unfamiliar with (apart from his justified reaction to Sebastian's antiquated racism). He brushed past low hanging branches with no regard for them or him. Most of the anger was directed at himself; his inadequacies had not only resulted in his brother's death, they had made him miss an opportunity of a lifetime with Liz. What would it take for him to become a real man?

*Stand up for yourself*, echoed in his head with Marcus' voice.

'JC?'

He had hardly gone a hundred metres when Liz's voice called after him then Liz herself skipped between the trees, the wind playing with her brittle cascade of mousey hair. His blisters as much as his emotions made him wait for her to catch up.

'What's wrong? You've been tense all day and I don't think it's just tiredness...'

Choosing the worst possible moment to stand up for himself, he spun on his heels and yelled in her face. 'Talk to you? About what, huh? About you doing the dirty with Tom Kennedy last night?'

Liz's dry lips opened in shock but he did not give her time to retort.

'Fine, let's have a conversation about you getting off with a dirty, lowlife thug from three hundred years ago. How was it? Was it good for you? Did he make you feel safe and secure, Liz, huh?'

'Justin...' Her mouth quivered, a bony hand moving to her mouth to stifle her whimper.

‘What, Liz? I ain’t angry, I just wanna know what possessed you to do it. Did he offer to protect you, keep you safe? Was it his yellow teeth that turned you on? Or maybe you’re just weak like some cheap prostitute? What do you say...’

Liz’s eyes turned to flame and she slapped him hard across the face before running wildly into the jungle. The smack stung so hard that JC needed a minute to balance himself. Unfortunately, it was not hard enough to knock any sense into him.

Instead of running after Liz, he strode back towards the other travellers looking for Tom Kennedy.





## sixteen

‘Do I have to order you to sit down, Sergeant?’

Simon could not help but smile. Not many of the abductees addressed him by his title apart from the suck-up Sebastian. When Katherine Whitman used that title, it sounded good. Exactly what he needed to hear.

‘Since when did you outrank me, Miss Whitman?’

‘Didn’t I mention? I’ve been promoted to Major since your abduction.’

‘In that case...yes sir.’ He lowered himself onto the upturned log beside her. He was in peak physical condition but it had been an arduous hike and even his military issue boots struggled with the terrain. He needed to take the weight off his size elevens even though he was keen to see what lay beyond the hill.

*If you only knew why, Sergeant; what’s been pushing you up this hill all day?*

That sensation had grown stronger with each stride. The density of the undergrowth had increased as they picked their way up the hillside, enclosing around the travellers as they trudged up the steep incline. While the others had become wearier, Simon’s energy increased as the morning progressed.

Neither he nor the voice in his head understood why.

‘So,’ Katherine smiled, ‘feel like sharing?’

‘Sharing what?’

‘What’s been pushing you up this hill all day? Never mind that crash-site back there, you’ve been ahead of the group all day.’

*The snoop has infiltrated your head, soldier...*

‘I’m not sure, Kath,’ he started, ‘but I’ve been feeling like this since the graveyard. There’s been this extra spring in my step for a day or two. I...’

He paused then turned to the journalist.

‘...what do you think?’

In his training days at Fort Hood, Simon learned that there were three kinds of leader; lion-tamers, vets and shepherds. A lion-tamer forced animals to do something until they could do it on demand (most drill sergeants followed this ilk). A vet treated animals so they were able to do whatever they wanted by themselves. Shepherds would walk with the animals to help them do what they have to. The armed forces preferred lion-tamers so that was what he became.

A man who forced others to learn quickly to fend for themselves.

*Now you’re a shepherd all of a sudden? Damn it, marine, you don’t have time to handhold these civvies; there’s something over that hill and you’ve got to get there as soon as possible. What’s with the “hold a focus group” approach?*

‘Well,’ Katherine finally found words to respond, ‘I noticed when you could read the epitaph, it shook you. Maybe something is driving you to find an answer you think is over the next hilltop. We’re slowing you down, you push us harder. Isn’t that the American way?’

‘Ouch with the stereotypes,’ he laughed.

‘Okay, maybe it’s the Simon Grady way. Bottom line, we’re all out here looking for answers but we won’t find any if we die from exhaustion scaling a hill that may lead nowhere.’

‘So you think I’ve been too hard on the guys?’

*What is all this crap, son? You going soft on me? Maybe you’d like to gather everyone in a group hug and sing ‘Kumbaya My Lord’ or something?*

Katherine hesitated, possibly remembering the incident when Gareth Oakley had tried providing advice or the incident on the riverbank when Finbarr had pushed the marine’s buttons. She had no way of knowing Simon’s anger management issues had crossed the line with women in the past and now there was no way he could even raise a finger to the journalist.

‘Maybe you just need to be reminded sometimes that we’re not all finely-tuned military machines. Sebastian looks like the most exercise he gets is hailing a horse-drawn carriage. Ease up now and then, that’s all.’

He sighed, running a hand over the base of his skull. ‘Yeah?’

‘Remember that promise we all made a few days ago? To continue being faithful to each other? I still believe in it.’

Her voice trailed off and their eyes met briefly. Simon read something else in her gaze, words she could not utter aloud even if she wanted.

*I still believe in you.*

He smiled but his hand drifted down from his skull to cover the tattoo of ‘Jayne’ on his arm.

A snapping branch broke his attention and he turned just in time to catch JC storming out of the undergrowth. Simon had never seen raw fury streaming from the young rapper’s eyes with such potency that it reached the marine from a dozen metres away. That kind of anger reminded Simon of the way he used to live his life.

He did not have time to reflect as JC strode across the clearing and struck Tom Kennedy on the chin with a mean right hook.

The convict did not see it coming and stumbled backwards, tripping over his own bare feet. As he hit the ground, JC pounced on top of him and started raining fists down on both sides of his head, yelling through gritted teeth as he swung.

‘You son of a bitch, I’ll kill you for what you did to her!’

The marine’s reactions suddenly seemed diminished, slowed to a still-frame pace. Katherine was off the ground first and even Sebastian started moving towards the irate rapper. Tom had a physique and height advantage but the first blow disorientated him, spilling blood from his nostrils into his beard. The rapper’s hands moved so quickly they seemed to blur.

‘JC, stop,’ Simon finally managed to shout before scrambling to his feet.

By the time he arrived, JC was all over the convict although Tom had managed to raise his hands to protect his face. Katherine was trying to pull the rapper away and shifted JC off balance. Tom regained his wits enough to push his attacker firmly in the chest, toppling him backwards onto the journalist.

As Simon picked up his pace (Sebastian was motionless, watching in fascination), Tom used his momentum to swing forward to his feet. The marine had not fully let go of his mistrust for a man who had confessed to killing his wife and her lover.

With positions reversed, Tom began moving towards the fallen rapper, murder in his eyes.

‘Tom, don’t.’ Simon thought about moving for his gun but refrained, not wanting another incident like the one with the Middle Eastern boy. Instead, he propelled himself through the air and tackled the convict before he could reach JC and Katherine.

The two men rolled through the overgrown grass, tumbling into the trunk of a tree with a thump. Reflexes kicking back into gear, Simon spun through and twisted the convict’s arm. As he subdued the convict, Tom yelled as much in frustration as pain.

‘Damn it, boss,’ he grimaced, ‘here we are again, huh?’

‘Keep quiet, Tom,’ Simon hissed before turning back to JC. ‘What the freaking Hell was that about, Justin?’

The rapper breathed heavily, Katherine still gripping his arms even though he had no strength left to fight her. ‘Nothing.’

‘Come on; you of all people don’t go flying in with your fists. Tell me what started this.’

The rapper struggled out of Katherine’s grasp and to his feet. Sebastian made his only move to help Katherine up while Simon slowly directed Tom to his feet without releasing the twisted arm.

‘Come on, boy,’ Tom suddenly leered, yellow teeth contrasted by blood dripping from his mouth. ‘Tell the good folks what set you off. Perchance it was your conversation with young Miss Stockton?’

JC suddenly snapped again and started forward, only Katherine’s quick reactions stopping him from flying at the convict’s throat. ‘Don’t you dare say her name, dude.’

‘Or what?’

‘I’ll mess your face so bad, it’d make onions cry...’

‘Enough,’ Simon yelled, tensing his grip on Tom’s wrist as a warning.

The atmosphere was unbearable as this sudden animosity hung in the air like a heavy fog. Five strangers from across time stood on the brink of another calamitous mistake. One wrong move could see somebody else hurt, something Simon was determined not to carry on his conscience.

‘Now, you guys listen to me,’ he started talking with the eerie, soft calmness that reminded him of Teacher, ‘and everything will be cool. I’ll let Tom go, Katherine’s going to release JC, Sebastian...you just stay where you are.’

The banker looked flummoxed but nodded.

‘On the count of three, everyone’s going to step back and we’ll be all quiet enough to talk about what’s going on. One...’

*You're sounding more and more like the damned teacher, soldier.*

‘...two, three.’

He released his grip on the convict's arm as Katherine took a step back from the rapper. Sebastian followed his own unique instructions. Apart from the murderous glare between JC and Tom, nothing else happened.

‘Right,’ the lion-tamer breathed slowly, grateful that Gareth's shepherd-like approach actually worked, ‘where's Liz now?’



## seventeen

In war, there is only one area of harmonious truth. Players differ from conflict to conflict, motives vary infinitely and the means of waging war have evolved for centuries. Whether clubbing tribesmen for scraps of food or blowing up armoured tanks with cruise missiles, only one thing had been constant in the history of warfare.

Hatred.

Simon stood between two men who hated each other. One was a savage killer from an eighteenth century penal colony; the other was a daydreaming kid from some slum in an LA gang district. Their worlds were so different, their lives had been poles apart but they burned holes in each other from a mandated distance.

Their anger, the marine deduced, had started with a woman.

‘What are you looking at, boy?’ Tom Kennedy spat, his beard tainted by drying blood from one of the luckier blows to his nose.

‘Nothing,’ JC Jackson responded, his voice low but not weak. The rapper was so hot that steam seemed to seep from his pores.

*Crazy what a woman does to a man.*

This was not the voice of the drill sergeant who had berated Simon’s every step of this journey, every decision of his career, every day of his adult life. This was Jayne’s voice. Soft, lilting like a lullaby, smooth like a fine liqueur and a thousand times as intoxicating.

*You were crazy like that once, remember? Crazy enough to...join the Marine Corps when it ended. I never did anything but be myself and that made you so kooky. How can you stand there and criticise this kid for getting angry, Si? At least anger dissipates, unlike tattoos.*

He cleared his throat, hoping the drill sergeant would return.

Katherine suddenly emerged through the brush, puffing in exhaustion. The four men had stayed behind (although all Sebastian had done was

watch the marine attempt to control the simmering bitterness). She had wanted to go alone, a little girly “natter” in private.

That was almost an hour ago.

‘You all right?’ Simon asked then followed it up with a more appropriate question. ‘Where’s Liz?’

The journalist shrugged, leaning on her knees. ‘I looked everywhere. She’s gone.’

He bit his lip, venting his own anger by kicking loose dirt into the air. Both JC and Tom stood up simultaneously, the rapper quickest to react.

‘What do you mean, she’s lost? We’ve got to find her.’ He started moving in the direction where he had last seen Liz but Simon stopped him with a firm hand on the shoulder.

‘Hold your horses, we’ve got to think this through or we’ll all get lost.’

JC shrugged off the marine’s hand. ‘Fine by me, I’ll be finding her and bringing her back, then.’

Thankfully, Katherine backed Simon by stepping in front of JC. ‘He’s right, Justin, give us a minute.’

The rapper danced on the balls of his feet, on the brink of running into the jungle when Katherine placed a soothing arm around his shoulders.

The marine watched the effortless tact she used to calm the rapper and lowered his gaze. That kind of “molly-codding” as Sebastian had put it was not his strength. When Gareth used it to such good effect during those first few days, Simon had reacted as though threatened. No teacher was going to show up a trained soldier with hand-holding and counselling.

*Damn right, the drill sergeant announced his return, this situation requires soldiers not wet-nurses. You’re a finely-tuned machine with deadly skills honed on Uncle Sam’s dime; that’s what wins wars, that’s what gets results. Not “molly-coddling” or whatever it’s called.*

Despite that sentiment, Simon suddenly realised how much he needed Katherine Whitman at his side.

As the journalist soothingly guided JC back to a seated position, she glanced up and met his gaze. Her eyes were searching, a plea for help. That was when he realised Katherine needed him just as much.

‘Right,’ he suddenly clapped his hands for attention, feeling suddenly invigorated by some of the old energy that propelled him through his basic training. ‘This is what we’re going to do. We’ll head off in the last



direction Liz was seen running and split into groups to cover ground quicker. Seb...'

He turned towards the weedy banker who seemed incapable of sweating even as the days became progressively warmer. His hands were still folded inside his jacket held in front of his waist, covering his midriff. With his tailored suit, classical moustache and once pristine formal shoes unsuitable for hiking, Sebastian was not his first choice for this mission.

'...you'll stay put in case the young lady returns. Just keep her here until we get back and look after the supplies; give her water or something.'

Sensing authority in the marine's escalating voice, the banker simply nodded (though he showed no emotion, Simon guessed he was glad to be excused from further physical activity).

'The rest of us will split into two groups; JC will go with Kath, you're with me Mister Kennedy.'

Tom leered without bothering to fix his stare. 'Don't trust me with anyone else, Sergeant?'

A part of Simon (the part the drill instructor had been quietly mentoring for years) wanted to just shoot the criminal scum in the head and get it over with. No great loss, really. He was getting better at controlling that part of himself. Still, there was no denying Tom could still cause considerable trouble.

'Practical reasoning,' was all he would say.

JC leapt up again from his spot on the floor, the last embers of his anger burning at Simon. 'Just let me go look for her, man. It's my fault she's out there, I can bring her back.'

Simon shared a momentary glance with Katherine before putting his hand on the rapper's shoulder again. This time, instead of applying force, he gently squeezed JC's shoulder blade.

'I know you want to help, JC, I do. But you're all my responsibility, understand? Since we left the facility, I've been in charge of your collective safety and it's as much my fault as yours. Besides, I've lost enough people already, I ain't losing another one.'

Thoughts of Finbarr O'Driscoll, Ganesh Omar, Salv Costanza, Franz Muller and the Middle Eastern boy flashed across his mind. Before he could be sidetracked worrying about what had happened to them, he refocused and forced a soft smile through his tough outer shell.

It was never going to be enough to calm the kid's anxieties but JC's body relaxed under his tender grip.

'Okay,' Simon nodded in understanding, 'go get yourselves some water and we'll head out.'

JC and Tom both turned towards the last of the supplies together. Sebastian followed them (despite not actually needing to get water, he probably took it as an excuse to drench his thirst). Katherine hesitated before sidling up to Simon.

'You know,' she started softly, 'it's not your fault.'

'What?'

'This thing with JC and Liz. Don't put that burden on your shoulders too, it's just an argument that got out of hand. I don't know what role Tom played in all this but I can't see how it's your fault in any way.'

He turned to her and this time his smile felt natural, unforced. He was not trying to molly-coddle anyone, he genuinely wanted to reassure the pretty journalist who sounded so worried for him.

'It's my fault because I made that promise. After the incident by the river, we all promised to be faithful to each other, support each other, believe in each other...and we won't leave anyone behind. I've lost five people since the river; unacceptable casualties. I won't lose Liz too.'

Katherine heard the emotions in his words. He believed in that promise as much as he had asked the others to believe in it. They had all placed their faith in him to lead them home and he had failed, in his eyes at least. If he could save just one, it might redeem a little piece of his wretched soul.

Jayne's voice had one last thing to say.

*Just remember, Simon. I never gave up on you and it still ended. The only enemy you've got to fight out here in this jungle is yourself. Maybe that's a fight you can't win alone.*

He did not react when Katherine raised a hand to his face and smoothed the outline of his jaw with a tender touch. 'One promise covers it all.'

## eighteen

Elizabeth Marie Stockton dropped to her knees and dry heaved over the upturned root of the large fir against which she had collapsed. The temperature was in the hundreds, the surface at the summit of the hill was uneven and withdrawal symptoms from fifteen months of heroin addiction were kicking her hard. Her emotions were an infusion of self-loathing, anger, exhaustion and fear. There was nothing in her stomach to throw up.

Between the heat and altitude, the air was thin. Twin suns tortured her through a clearing in the trees, unfiltered rays that dried her skin. Her ribcage was pressed tight against her skin. Death seeped from her pores as she battled to breathe.

In a brief moment of clarity, she wondered how her life had turned so bad. She came from a good family, had a moral upbringing, lived in the spirit of karma and always wanted her parents to feel proud. From a drug-riddled prostitute slaving for an abusive pimp to an alien abductee waiting for death on a distant world; what had she done so wrong to deserve such punishment?

The moment passed and she dragged herself to her feet. It felt like hours since she had run away from JC. The truth she was too delirious to comprehend was that she had been running from herself. The shame of that night with Tom made her want to die inside or at least get away from the guilt reflected in JC's eyes.

*I did this to myself*, she mused dryly, tears streaming down her cheeks. *Maybe the angels in the water were reaching out to save me...from myself.*

Her nails ground down the bark of the tree as she pulled herself forward with no idea where she was going and nothing but hatred for the person she was running from; Elizabeth Marie Stockton.

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‘I reckon she told you.’

JC glanced up at the savage brute beside him as he picked up one of the leaf cups. Tom had a good few inches over him and maybe an extra fifty pounds of bulking muscle honed from road gang labour. Even as the rapper stood up, Tom towered over him with that menacing presence reminding him of the bully boys on the basketball court.

*How did I ever get this guy off his feet?*

‘Told me what, dog?’

‘That she and I made love last night.’

‘Didn’t have to.’

‘So you knew? Did you come upon us in the night, I wonder?’

‘Just shut it, Tom.’

Despite standing only inches apart, there was a tangible tension between them. The marine had momentarily forgotten about them as he talked with the journalist while Sebastian just loitered, surreptitiously observing. The two men were locked in a bitter grip of searing eye contact that lingered uneasily.

‘Fine, Mister Jackson. This game was getting too easy; no sport in it. Let us see how it changes when the stakes are raised.’

Tom’s words hissed through his lips like a venomous viper. They carried as great a threat as any JC had endured on the streets of Los Angeles. The first time he had seen this convict, Tom had been on the brink of slashing an innocent woman’s throat with a knife stashed on his body before his abduction. Gareth mentioned the reason Tom had been shackled up on New South Wales in the 1780s; murdering his wife and her lover.

This man was more than capable of carrying out any threat he made.

‘You two,’ Simon called, his attention refocused again, ‘get over here.’

Tom did not need to say another word. He left his water behind and strode towards the marine as instructed, showing his broad back browning under the burning suns.

‘You should be careful, my lad.’

Sebastian had been almost invisible to the side of JC, slithering unnoticed around the stand-off. He had made little contribution to their journey apart from drink water and complain. The little

misunderstanding between them was, for JC at least, ancient history and the banker seemed keen to make amends with some friendly advice.

‘That gentleman could snap you in twain,’ he whispered once Tom was out of earshot. ‘Caution is indeed called for.’

‘Thanks but I can take care of myself, you dig. Been doing it ever since my brother died.’

There had been no reason to bring up Marcus’ death but when he did, JC felt a tinge of remorse. He had let his brother down by not being a man; he had let Liz down by not being a better man.

*Maybe it ain’t about taking care of myself, he thought. Maybe I’s gotta take care of others first.*

His gaze followed the convict across the path.

‘JC,’ the marine yelled impatiently, ‘let’s go.’

‘I’ll be waiting for you,’ Sebastian muttered with a courteous tap on the rapper’s back before retreating towards the supplies.

JC crossed to the others wordlessly. Simon scanned his face for any signs that trouble was brewing within his furious, adolescent brain. He was careful not to display his true feelings.

‘Okay,’ the marine started, addressing the whole party, ‘we’re coming back here and with Liz. Nobody else is going to die on this planet as long as I’ve got a say in it. Let’s aim to get back by the time the first sun sets.’

The marine pointed in the direction of the two suns beginning to dip away to the west. He paused then frowned as though something did not look right in the direction he was pointing. Quickly, he brushed it aside and pressed on.

‘This is strictly search and rescue. Get in, get out. Whoever finds Liz, bring her back here on the double and wait for the others. Take care to watch your trails; Kath and I will be team leaders responsible for marking our way but keep your wits about you.’

It sounded like a textbook military speech to JC. He barely heard any of it as he resisted the burning temptation to glare at the convict.

‘If you get into trouble, call for help. No need for call signs, we’re the only ones out here. Watch your bearings, we don’t want to get lost ourselves. Whatever happens, don’t lose your partner. If that happens, come straight back or if you don’t know the way back, head for the top of the hill and stay vocal. Right...any questions.’

A thorough briefing. No thoughts were voiced. Murderous or otherwise.

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‘This is where I yelled at her.’

Simon spent a minute checking the scene. In truth, he did not really know what he was looking for but he felt it was important to inspect everything before leaping into a dense, overgrown jungle. There were a few hours before sunset; plenty of time.

The setting was quiet. Despite their altitude, there was barely a breeze to disturb the leaves. The direction JC indicated led towards a mass of mismatched oaks and firs, densely packed. The grass grew in blissful harmony, undisturbed until their arrival. There were no tracks apparent to his eyes.

*This is your time, soldier. Time to be counted, time to prove your worth. An innocent girl is lost in the jungle and it's your responsibility to rescue her. Not the grand mission you had in mind when you left Teacher's playhouse but it's a start.*

Nothing had gone according to plan since they had crossed that stone bridge heading away from their fellow abductees. The near-fatal river crossing, shooting the Middle-Eastern boy, losing five travellers overnight, wandering through the jungle on the brink of exhaustion. He had expected so much more.

*Just like war, he thought solemnly, real life is never what you expect it to be.*

With a sigh, he turned to the others. Four strangers in search of one lost, frightened young woman who had been through so much already on their expedition. This time his speech felt less like a rehearsed Pattenesque monologue.

‘Be careful in there, guys. Just watch out for each other and let's find Liz. When we do, we'll take the rest of the day off but first we need to work together. Can I count on you, for Liz's sake?’

Glum, tense faces responded silently with reluctant nods of acknowledgement. Katherine, JC and Tom looked anxious, frustrated and unreadable respectively. If his gut had been any good at sensing trouble, it would have been screaming at him.

‘Right,’ Simon said after a deep inhale, ‘fall out.’

He delved into the jungle slightly to the left of the direction Liz had run. Tom followed as Katherine and JC meandered to the right. The mission, to find one lost abductee in an overgrown jungle, was on.

## nineteen

Patrick Barrie had never wished harm on anyone in his life. His mother, God rest her soul, referred to him as “a man of peace” before her death from Spanish Flu. She had been a good role model, teaching him to value and appreciate human life.

As he stood motionless beneath the low ceiling of the cupboard, the creature he pointed the Webly MkIV service revolver at was not human.

‘Patrick,’ Sara Langley whispered, her pupils dilating to pin points, ‘what’re you doing?’

The question had been playing through his mind like a skipping gramophone since he convinced Tanya to take a break and hand over the gun (only fair since she stole it from him). No, actually since he had inadvertently overheard Gareth plotting to kill the suspected alien.

*‘We still don’t know why these aliens took us and if it was part of some plot or scheme then she could represent a risk to the group. My gut’s telling me something’s not right. I have to protect the group first...protect you. If she is a threat, we have to take care of it.’*

He had heard enough by that point and quietly turned away. The tone in the teacher’s voice had been dark and sinister, bringing up dark and sinister inferences.

Gareth Oakley was the undisputed leader of the Remainders and the way he had been talking to Bryony earlier, he seemed to have been considering drastic action in order to deal with the young woman he suspected was an alien. Dark thoughts were tempting the teacher into a difficult position and Patrick felt he had to take action.

The little makeshift prison labelled as a cupboard suddenly seemed so small.

His thumb rested on the safety, forefinger twitching at the trigger.

There was genuine fear in Sara's eyes, terror on her pretty face. 'Patrick...'

As her features brimmed with terror, he was reminded of her expression two nights earlier. When they had been running for their lives from the beast, when she had tripped in the mud, when he had turned in the pouring rain to see her left for dead.

And done nothing.

With a sigh, Patrick lowered his aim.

*I can't do it again, had been repeating through his mind for over an hour, I can't allow this wee lass to die when I can do something about it. I can't let Gareth, pressurised by the paranoia of the insane Russian woman and her impossible claims, make a mistake like he's planning. I can't let him kill this girl.*

He had seen so many crazy things throughout the eight days of this nightmare but the idea that such an innocent girl could represent a risk was beyond insanity. She had done nothing wrong, there was no proof against her but accusations from a woman who confessed to hallucinating about coloured mist. Did anybody deserve to die for that?

'If you sneak out of the facility now, you can hide in the jungle until this all blows over. I'll talk to Gareth and get him to see some sense. Stay close to where we found the path up the volcano so I can find you once the situation has calmed somewhat.'

With that, he stepped aside to show her the exit.

Sara just stared at him, unblinking. 'You're letting me go? Why? You know I'm not an alien, right?'

'I know who *I* am; the kind of man who can't leave the fallen behind, the kind of man who stands up for those who can't defend themselves. I'm standing up for you because you need someone who will.'

The relieved smile that spread across her face gave him the chance to mask his awkwardness.

*That's not who I am, really. I'm the failure who's never been close to anyone long enough to get to know them. I'm the coward who escaped the war where children like Michael Leigh lost their lives protecting my liberties. I'm the man who could not defeat his fear to save this girl from a savage animal. That's the kind of man I am.*

And his guilt had certainly fuelled the anxiety he had suffered since overhearing Gareth's ominous conversation. This noble action was his choice to become the kind of man he wanted to be and relieve someone he respected from making the biggest mistake of his young life.



‘So, you don’t believe those lies Tanya’s spreading about me?’ Sara asked in a soft, sweet voice.

‘I’m not sure what’s wrong with Tanya however I can’t believe you’re anything but an innocent, bonny girl who has suffered a series of unfortunate events. I can’t just stand by while this happens so...go.’

Her smile jittered as she placed a hand tenderly on his cheek.

He chuckled nervously as her fingers caressed the stubble beneath his chin. ‘Just get moving before somebody sees you. You can lock this door, I’ll tell the others you tricked me into thinking you had fallen ill.’

‘Patrick...’

‘Just go, Sara. It’ll be all right.’

‘But...you’re betraying Gareth. I thought he was your friend.’

Patrick struggled as realisation dawned on him. Maybe he was betraying the man who had saved him from certain death twice. Gareth had been his friend and saviour – rescuing him from the jaws of the beast on the cliff – and this was how he repaid the debt? By going against him now?

‘Do you know Shakespeare?’

Sara frowned but nodded.

‘He once wrote “here in this island we arrived and here have I, thy schoolmaster, made thee more profit than other princesses can that have more time for vainer hours and tutors not so careful”. Know it?’

Surprisingly, she answered with a smile. ‘The Tempest, right? Prospero said it.’

‘Yes, it is. I read his works as a boy. Memorised many of his plays but this one has been repeating in my head for days and I did not know why. Then I watched Gareth talking to Bryony, discussing what to do with you.’

His eyes began to cloud over and he blinked away what he believed to be an onslaught of fresh tears.

‘Prospero was a teacher marooned on a distant land with nothing but his teachings and a young woman in need of protection. He claimed to be wise but he kept secrets from the one person who trusted him in the name of protecting her. He manipulated others, controlling what he considered lesser creatures. He was driven by mortal sins to bring destruction upon those he claimed to have loved.’

Sara watched in bewilderment as the Scot battled his own emotions. 'And you see Gareth like this? A hypocrite who takes actions to protect people but is motivated by evil thoughts?'

'I don't think evil's the word I would use but...'

*But Gareth was thinking about killing this innocent girl, I know it. That is evil. If he killed young Sara out of paranoia and anger, he would be no better than the wizard who brought a storm upon innocent men out of a thirst for vengeance. If you want to do something noble with your life, you need to stand up for what is right...even if it means standing against your saviour.*

'Just go, lass. This will all calm down, I promise.'

The teenager smiled before starting towards the curved doorway. She had only taken a step and a half when she paused. 'Before I go, I want to thank you for helping me...'

Her voice was low as she turned on her heels. The seductive tones of a frightened girl were not enough to put Patrick on his guard.

Sara swung a heavy fist into his chest with such unnatural force that he flew through the air and smacked hard against the rear wall of the cupboard. With a grunt, he crumpled to the floor, the wind knocked out of him with the combined impact of the punch and the shock. He wheezed as he hit the ground, stars skipping across his vision.

'...so here's two handy tips, Patrick.'

He glanced up just in time to see her foot flying towards his face. It connected squarely with the side of his face, which exploded with more pain than Patrick had ever experienced in his pathetic excuse for a life. Blood trickled down his nose as consciousness danced away from his grasp.

'Don't be so easily fooled by appearances...'

As he slipped into darkness, the last image he could see was Sara Langley prising the gun from his flailing fingers and the last sound he heard was her final piece of advice as she cocked the trigger.

'...and when you die, for your own sake, take this lesson with you.'

## twenty

*This is impossible*, Simon Grady thought dejectedly.

When the Explorers left the facility, the marine had not truly comprehended how impossible his mission could be. The jungle showed no sign of ending and apart from the river that crossed their path, there were few features to the landscape. The entire world might be one wild forest that held no means of sending them home.

‘What shall we do if we can not find Elizabeth?’

He glanced across at the burly convict two paces behind him (the drill sergeant had neglected to remind Simon to keep his enemies in front at all times; another rookie mistake). Tom sounded genuinely concerned but there was not a lot of trust between the two men whose first encounter had involved one shooting the other.

‘We’re not leaving her behind, Tom.’

‘She could be hurt, she may have fallen or...’

‘That’s why we’re not stopping until we find her, understood?’

The convict fell silent as they picked their way carefully through a cluster of ancient oaks. The slope had eased off and they seemed to be skimming the top of the hill. Surrounding undergrowth was denser at the top for some reason, making their search less effective and more arduous.

For the first time, Simon wished he had stayed back at the facility.

*Conceding defeat, Marine? That’s not in your nature; you’re supposed to step up to challenges like this not cower in their presence. Teacher’s probably wishing he had bowed to your authority in the first place instead of dying a slow, futile death in that abandoned facility.*

Whatever had happened to Gareth and the others, he still guessed it was less testing than the path he had chosen for the Explorers. A week on inadequate rations with obstacles at every turn and no true hope of

finding a way home. That was not what he had promised the people who had followed him.

*You made no promises, remember? You never said this journey would be easy, you made it clear on the morning you left that there were no guarantees out in the wilderness.*

Just because he had painted an honest picture, Simon had not intended on leading them to despair and death. He had crossed the stone bridge outside the facility full of enthusiasm and hope; he had scaled this hillside full of doubts and fears.

For the first time in his life, Simon wished he was someone else.

Suddenly he stopped and arched his neck towards the north. There had been no noise or movement from that direction but he halted with one leg hovering in mid-air, mid-step.

Something was there.

‘Liz?’ No answer. ‘Liz, it’s Simon.’

A distant branch moved too heavily for the wind’s touch.

‘Is that you?’

Still no answer.

His instincts took over and he lowered his leg slowly, planting it firmly on the ground. When a friendly does not identify itself, assume it is hostile; one part of his military training that had stuck. Intently focused on the branch, he unclipped the holster on his belt and fingered the butt of his gun.

‘Stay down,’ he whispered towards Tom’s position, throwing his right fist vertical in a signal the convict would not have understood.

Simon did not want another repeat of the incident by the river when his rashness resulted in the shooting of a fellow Explorer. He edged softly towards the tree where he had spotted the movement and unholstered the gun without releasing the safety.

‘Liz,’ he called one more time, louder.

The word was loud enough to generate a response.

Every branch on the tree suddenly shook and something flew at Simon with such ferocity that it had no shape or form. A dark shadow swooping to attack. As he dropped to his knees and covered his head, a swirling wind brushed against him as whatever was attacking flew with bullet-like velocity towards him.

And passed him.

Tweeting.

He looked up as the wind dissipated in time to watch a flock of four-winged birds disappear through the trees. Hundreds of them, blotting out the dying sunlight streaming through the branches above. Their numbers and combined speed almost knocked him over but they had only been interested in getting away from him. The jungle returned to silence in their absence.

Sighing, Simon turned to check that there was no sign of Liz near the tree (which on closer inspection appeared to contain dozens of nests) then swung back around.

Tom Kennedy was nowhere to be seen.

\*\*\*\*\*

*This is impossible*, Katherine Whitman thought dejectedly.

When the Explorers left the facility, the journalist had almost been looking forward to the journey ahead. The BBC paid her well to explore various regions of wilderness on her planet but this was beyond the scope of a documentary. As Dickie Attenborough told her once, “you’ve got to make the most of any opportunity life throws your way, dear”. She wished she had a camera with her.

She wished she had her cameraman with her.

John Cottrell was a bit of a rogue as far as cameramen went; he was fit and he knew it. They had worked together on seven jobs and he had worked his charms on her during the last three. When all alone in the Serengeti in a restricting tent with nothing but a charming torso on legs for company, what’s a girl to do?

That was what adventures were supposed to be about; exotic locations, enchanting sights, magical days of exploration followed by nights of fairytale passion. This adventure into an alien jungle had not been what she had expected; unending wilderness, sparse rations, gruelling days of toil followed by tacky nights of worry.

‘What if she’s hurt or somethin’, man,’ JC continued babbling at her side (he had hardly stopped since they left Simon’s team). ‘She could’ve fallen down the hill or broke her leg. What if she passed out from exhaustion or something? Kath?’

‘What?’

She could not help but yell a little. The young rapper was slowing down their search with his uneasiness and she was struggling to keep track of their surroundings. Despite her experiences exploring rainforests

and deserts, there was no chopper waiting on standby or base camp nearby to back her up.

Katherine was alone.

That was what made this impossible and she should have seen it back at the laboratory instead of getting all excited about the prospect of exploring a new world. The Explorers had been destined for failure from the start. No maps, limited supplies, no idea what they were looking for or where it was.

The whole expedition had just been a way of prolonging death.

‘What we gonna do if we can’t find Liz?’ JC asked again, his voice quivering on the higher notes.

*Poor kid blames himself for this, she thought. They had a row about something and he took it out on Tom but he really blames himself. I’m sure he’d do anything to make it right.*

They stopped beside a fallen tree that seemed to have toppled out of its roots. The trunk was wide but wild grass had already started growing around the edges. It must have been down for some time, maybe struck by lightning (or something else falling from the sky).

‘Look, Justin...’ She held out a hand but he batted it away.

‘No, this is my fault. I ain’t leaving her out here on her own, I can’t. I won’t let anyone down any more, you dig?’

Katherine did not understand what he meant but she lowered her head for an instant, a combination of fatigue and frustration with the entire situation. Though her gaze was only briefly distracted, it was enough. When she glanced back up, JC was running in the opposite direction calling Liz’s name at the top of his tearful voice.

He ran so impossibly fast, his legs actually began to blur.

‘JC, wait,’ she yelled and started after him.

With the downed tree in her path, she tried to vault over its base to cut him off before he got too far. Her trailing leg snagged a broken branch and she tumbled forward onto the hard ground with a thud. Her legs followed adding pressure to her upper body as she landed, smacking her head against hard soil and knocking the wind completely out of her.

Katherine lay dazed beside the tree as JC disappeared like a bullet into the undergrowth.

## twenty-one

Christopher Veroni, the Scourge of London, was all about making impressions. Here was a man who wore fresh Armani suits for coffee with his clients, a man who skipped between A-list parties with different women on his arm, a man who claimed pop starlets and young rock gods amongst the folk who looked to him for inspiration.

This abduction had changed him.

Falling from grace hit the righteous hardest. The suave charms and seductive Mediterranean looks meant nothing in a place like Carbonek except as leverage against the weak. How could he use them when he was weak too?

He scaled the winding metal staircase that wound up from the engine room to the northern corridor. The enigmatic Russian was following but he refused to respond to her calls.

‘Christopher, wait.’

Her gritty accent played games with his name, swirling it into an intoxicating cacophony of syllables. She was seducing him, the nerve of it. Power was his domain, he should be in control. Further signs that corrective action was required.

*I'm not going to become another nobody, his thoughts sounded gritted, waiting for the glorious teacher to hand out orders, waiting for pity sex from women who think they're in control, waiting to die a slow death because I'm too weak. I'm in command, I am the dominant male, I won't show weakness for anyone.*

Especially some teenage tart playing him for a fool with lies and deceit.

He reached the northern corridor and began striding down it, his face set in a mould of determination and blood lust. Tanya was just a few steps behind and reached forward to grab his arm.

‘Stop and listen, please.’

‘Why, Tanya?’ he yelled, snatching his arm from her grip.

‘Because I know that look.’

‘Reading my aura again, huh?’

Christopher did not believe the Russian’s fairytale about coloured strands of invisible auras emanating from the tops of their heads. It was madness, pure science-fiction unworthy of consideration by a man who lived in the bitter practicalities of real life.

The Russian hesitated, her eyes darting around in search of a way out. When she met his eyes again, there was nothing but seriousness in her deep husky voice. ‘I know that look when a man wants to kill a woman. I see it many times in my life, I see it now. Do not kill her yet.’

He gaped in an equal mixture of shock and raw anger. ‘What makes you think I want to kill anyone?’

‘Your eyes, your walk, that way your fingers are white from your fist. All you think you need is one weapon and...’

She trailed off, again on the verge of revealing something intimate about herself that she was unwilling to share. They had known each other for eight days and he had only discovered her surname was Ivanov a few minutes earlier. What other secrets, darker than her given name, was this woman protecting?

‘...she lied to us all, Christopher. She is not what she claims.’

‘How do you know for sure?’

‘It is in her eyes also. When she looks at you, there is hunger and innocence until you look away. Then there is...loathing, I think. They are distant eyes. She sometimes looks at strange things with the wonder like she has never seen them before. Things like trees and fingers.’

For the moment, his feet forgot where he had been heading and twisted towards her.

‘Why not kill her then?’ he suddenly asked, not sure he should be asking the question. ‘If she’s nothing but an alien masquerading as a human, why should we keep her alive? Answer that one, Miss Ivanov?’

Tanya rolled her eyes at his use of her name. ‘Because she may have information. We must interrogate her.’

‘Pity you won’t get the chance.’

Out of the shadows of a laboratory archway, the creature masquerading as Sara Langley emerged holding the antique service revolver. She stepped into the hallway waving the weapon between



Christopher and Tanya, keeping her distance in case of any sudden moves.

‘Sara,’ Christopher smiled out of reflex, ‘babe, what’re you doing?’

‘Drop the act, Chris. I know you were only using me for one thing and for a while, I kind of enjoyed it too. Now, the game has changed thanks to your Russian friend’s gift. Out of curiosity, what gift did you get, Chris?’

He frowned, stepped forward then, after she clicked open the safety clip on the gun, stepped back raising his hands. ‘Gift? What the bleeding Hell are you talking about?’

‘See, every one of you underwent the same medical procedure in this facility. Think of it like switching on all the lights in your mind, yeah? Your species only uses ten percent of your brains so there’s plenty of scope.’

*“Your species” ...the girls flipped!*

‘That ten percent thing’s a myth,’ he scoffed.

*Trying to make the crazy chick with the gun sound stupid? Shut up!*

‘Actually, at any time the human brain can only cope with ten percent of neurons firing at once. Slow processors, you humans. We needed to give you a bit more processing power to serve our purpose.’

‘Who is we?’ Tanya asked at his side; she also had her hands raised. ‘And where is Patrick?’

Sara began pacing in front of them, her eye never leaving the Russian. ‘Patrick fancied himself a righteous man. He was going to betray your glorious leader by letting me escape thinking he could talk some sense into Gareth. Poor old fool was too trusting for his own good.’

Christopher closed his eyes. The way Sara was waving that weapon, she might have already used it. Poor Patrick; the merry old Scot probably thought he was doing the right thing.

When he opened them again, murder was swirling around his pupils like mercury. ‘If you’ve hurt him...’

‘Hey,’ Sara yelled, pointing the weapon at the gap between his eyes, ‘it’s a little late to show concern for anyone, Christopher. You were quick enough to leave me out in the jungle when the beast was chasing us and I know you were planning to manipulate everyone to stay on this planet for good.’

The Russian glanced in his direction but his gaze was snagged on the young American’s burning glare.

‘Look,’ he hissed, ‘we can talk about all of this if you put down the gun.’

‘It’s too late for that. It’ll take days to convince everyone to follow your lead. I can’t wait no longer.’

‘We can still convince the others to make a life here...’

‘I don’t want to stay, Christopher. I want to leave this facility and we don’t have much time.’

Before he could prompt her about what she meant, Sara spun her aim in the direction of the Russian.

‘Because you’ve ruined everything by exposing me, you’re going to return to Base Camp and bring one of the abductees to me. Then we can all leave together. If I see anyone else, you mention this to anybody, I’ll kill him.’

She swung the gun back towards the music producer, whose eyes widened in horror.

*She’s really going to do it, ain’t she? After everything I did for her, everything I felt for her, she would kill me just like that. She’s insane, all right. Maybe she really is an alien...*

‘Why do you have to leave?’ Tanya asked, her voice steady and cool in contrast to the panic filling Christopher’s head.

‘I want everyone to leave,’ the imposter’s voice changed from anger to despair, ‘and you should have left with Sergeant Grady and the others. Only Gareth insisted on staying behind to explore and it’s going to get everyone killed. Can’t you see I’m trying to save you all?’

The revelation was lost in the heated emotions of a hold-up, stacked on top of the emotions Christopher had been burning through like oxygen moments earlier. He had been intent on killing the woman who had embarrassed and manipulated him; now she was on the brink of killing him for the promise of saving the others.

‘Get moving,’ Sara screamed, stepping forward to grab his shoulder and push him onto his knees. There was unnatural strength in her grip and he buckled like the stem of a flower. When the alien dressed like a teenage girl pressed the muzzle of her gun against the back of his skull, he felt a tear seep from the corner of his eye.

Glancing up, he met Tanya’s gaze and pleaded wordlessly, no longer concerned with what impression he made.

*Call yourself the Scourge of London...*

‘Who should I bring you back?’ she sighed reluctantly.

Given his impending death and all the others panicked feelings churning in his gut, Christopher was genuinely surprised when he heard the answer.

‘Bring me Claire Stewart.’



## twenty-two

On the western slope of the hillside sixty miles from Carbonek, a small dais overlooked the unending jungle below. A wide circle of grey dirt remained unconquered by the wild grass and the surrounding trees seemed to bend towards its centre, almost bowing gracefully. Dotted around the picturesque perimeter were fragments of stone that matched the crumbling portico at the edge of the precipice, a broad archway dotted with weeds and vines.

Liz Stockton stumbled into this clearing and collapsed in the centre of the circle.

Her feet were bleeding from the chaotic, barefooted ramble that had led her to this place. Pallid skin clung to her frame like thin pastry on a badly made pie. Tears mingled with sweat and blood beneath her nose as her fingers dug into the dirt beneath her, the only sign of movement.

*This is where I'm going to die*, she thought as exhaustion threatened to overwhelm her.

And maybe she deserved it.

Prostitution and drug addiction might have preceded this damnation but they were not her greatest sins. Betrayal was; she had betrayed her family by running away, she betrayed the one person on this planet she felt she could trust by sleeping with Tom (hurting JC in some deeper way she did not understand) and most importantly, she betrayed herself by letting herself down. If it was not electrocution or drowning or angels in the water, maybe it was more fitting that she just die alone of a failing body.

It was possibly the worst way for a lonely, frightened, frail prostitute to die.

*Die*, cycled through her delirious mind, *die, die, die before the angels come*.

She laid still for a few moments, breathing in warm air. Time passed but she did not. Her irregular heartbeat continued thudding between the ground and her chest.

When it refused to give in, she raised her head from the dirt and wearily inspected her surroundings.

The jungle was impossibly still. Not even birdsong, a recent addition to this world but still noticeable by its absence. There was barely a breath of a breeze to cool her skin. For the first time in days, there was an open sky in front of her. Behind the arch, the blue horizon was tinted a lazy orange as the suns began to dip over the distant tree line.

Something shook Liz from inside; a numb sense of realisation washing over her, forcing energy back into her weary limbs. Slowly, she pushed herself onto her knees then up to her bloody feet. Pain brought fresh tears to her eyes as she stumbled forward and stood underneath the arch. Something which had been wrong for days was suddenly clear in front of her weary eyes.

The two suns were hanging in the sky, one just touching the horizon as the other followed it. Liz frowned in disbelief at the sight before her.

Eight days earlier, she and the other abductees had escaped the alien facility in which they had all awoken. They stepped out onto a grey dirt path, one which led across a deep ravine and underneath a stone arch identical to the one beneath which Liz was standing. They had momentarily been filled with optimism of being on their own planet until they looked up.

Two suns were overhead; one had been about a third the size of the other and burned wildly in the sky. Those suns had been largely obscured by the ceiling of greenery that constantly covered their journey through the jungle. On her ninth day as an abductee, Liz stood before those two suns again.

One was getting larger.

The smaller sun, which had been a third the size of its brother, was now nearly the same size. Its bright orange flames seemed even wilder as it blazed a trail towards the distance.

*That's insane, she thought, it's just a side effect of the exhaustion and fear and the withdrawal symptoms. Suns don't just get bigger in the space of a week. It's impossible.*

So far, impossible had been ineffectual on this world.

'Elizabeth?'

She spun around as a man's voice interrupted her thoughts. Someone had found her, thank God, she was saved...

Liz turned to see Sebastian Edwards standing at the edge of the circle of dirt.

The little banker stood primly with his hands cupped in front of him, his shirt immaculately tucked into his trousers and not a bead of sweat on his pallid brow. His handlebar moustache was curved slightly in a looping frown of concern. She had been expecting maybe JC or Simon or even Tom but at least she was safe at last.

'Are you all right, my dear?'

Liz breathed deeply in relief, her lips quivering. 'Sebastian?'

'Everyone is looking for you,' he smiled, treading slowly towards her, 'they were so worried when you ran off.'

She began to weep from relief. 'I got lost...I fell...God, I've been running for so long...thank God...I thought I was going to die.'

'Maybe you will.'

His response was surprisingly cold and for a moment, she did not react. It was just not the sort of answer expected from a well-dressed London gentleman from 1888.

'What do you...'

The final word never left her mouth. Sebastian raised his right hand slowly, thumb and first two fingers outstretched like a claw. His eyes narrowed as he tightened his fingers.

As he did, Liz felt her throat contracting as though something powerful was gripping her neck. A scream squeezed through but was cut dead as the air caught in her lungs. Pain burned her chest and her fingers clawed at the invisible force chocking the life out of her.

Sebastian's frown melted into a sinister leer and he raised his outstretched hand sharply upwards.

Even as her lungs burned, she felt her feet leave the ground. Her legs kicked independent to the panicked thoughts cycling through her mind as she hovered in mid-air. Blood dripped from her feet as she hovered on the brink of the fatal drop behind her.

'Why...' squeaked out of her strangled voice.

'Why, you ask?' Sebastian coldly replied. 'Because we are all flawed creatures, Miss Stockton. Every last one of us.'

He strode towards her, stepping through her silhouette cast by the sun and its imposter brother. A cold twinkle in his eye outlined her body as it hung like a limp marionette puppet.

‘Humanity is a flawed creation, after all. Young Mister Jackson told me of a time when children play with guns on the street and they allow Negroes to run for President and common decency is overshadowed by sin and debauchery. Time changes little within us. We each have our flaws, our weaknesses; mine is watching pretty young whores suffer.’

He retrieved something from beneath his waistcoat; a short knife with a rough blade that Liz recognised as the implement Tom had threatened Bryony James with back at the facility. Her eyes widened as life bled out of her body and the banker flashed the blade back and forth in front of his eyes.

‘I’m afraid I’m going to have to break my promise to Sergeant Grady.’

A sick fascination spread across Sebastian’s face as he watched the outline of the knife glint in the embers of dusk. His eyes returned to her body, dwelling on her twitching legs as his smirk widened.

‘Ladies of the night know how to scream, I assure you. They are the most flawed of us all because they sell the only thing they have; their dignity. I am certainly down on whores, you might say. They sicken me yet they give me pleasure.’

With his jacket no longer covering his midsection, Liz could see precisely how much pleasure she gave him. The small, quaint man who never sweated was burning with ecstasy at her pain. His moustache curled into a sick sneer as he used his magical gift to squeeze her windpipe.

‘I will enjoy cutting you, Miss Stockton. An evil thought, I grant you, but it gives me great pleasure nonetheless.’

She held out a hand towards him, flickering eyes begging for mercy. ‘Please...Sebastian...’

The little man laughed. ‘My dear, you may call me by the name which the rest of the East End knows me; call me the Scourge of London. Call me Jack the Ripper.’



## twenty-three

‘That’s it.’

Anna Forbes inhaled for possibly the first time in an hour. Her skin glistened with sweat that was only partly due to the tropical climate stalking the halls of Base Camp. For the first time in her life, she could understand what her father went through every day.

There had always been a clear distinction between the great surgeon and the family man she had known as a child. One was renowned and respected by his peers as a medical marvel; that life was nothing more than a story regarded with nothing more than a passing fancy by his daughter. The other was a strict, liberal disciplinarian whom she loved until she was old enough to know better.

*I should’ve paid more attention to him, she thought with a hint of reluctant acceptance, because he wasn’t a bad dad, I mean he never raised his hands to me or Mom, he provided for us without interfering in either of our lives so I guess he did a good job under difficult circumstances...to go through all this kind of stress and come home to read stories every night, he must’ve been a special dad.*

‘Thank the Lord,’ Michael Leigh sighed, leaning against a chamber dome with sweat dripping from his own forehead.

Surgery had lasted two hours. The young WWI medic had carefully dissected the broken leg and picked through tendons and blood until finding a ruptured artery. Anna had never seen so much crimson chaos but she stood steadfast at his side, helping with sutures and dabbing his forehead with a cool handkerchief. The procedure had been long and difficult but it was finally over.

‘The rest is in the hands of God,’ Michael muttered as he sank against the base of the chamber. ‘The artery’s repaired and as long as the suture holds then it’s all down to Matthew. H-He’s lost so much blood though, I-I-I...’

He trailed off and his head dropped, a combination of fatigue and futility. The peasant girl, Juliette, twitched as though she wanted to cross towards him but stayed in her quiet corner of Base Camp. Anna knelt beside the medic and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

‘You did good, Michael. Matthew’s a strong character, he won’t give up if you don’t.’

The nineteen year old, snatched from a war-torn Belgium town during the peak of the First World War, had been nothing short of heroic. So young and so nervous, he had proven his character and his worth even before attempting an operation that seemed destined for failure. She had never felt so proud of anyone in her life.

‘Guys?’

Anna glanced up at Denise Newman and a pang of guilt rippled through her body. The English Rose had stayed around to fetch water but only watched silently when not required. That silence had distracted the New Yorker throughout the surgery like a ghostly reminder of the mistakes she had made.

She should never have confessed her sexuality to Denise.

*Just because her boss used her as an office plaything in the days when sexual harassment was barely even a taboo and she grew up without an understanding of what it means to be a woman and gay, doesn’t mean I should’ve laid that shocker on her, she doesn’t know where to look around me now, I mean, not everyone understands what it means to be in love with someone of the same sex, right?*

Even special dads who kick their daughters out on the street for being homosexual.

‘What, Denise?’

It was short and sharp, an outburst from the end of a tiring day. The final nail in the coffin of their potential relationship, perhaps.

Glancing up, Anna’s concerns melted when she realised how the young Londoner’s face turned white.

She struggled to her feet and crossed to where Denise was standing beside the chamber on which Michael had operated. When a single tear strolled down her cheek, she turned her face away allowing Anna a clear view of the chamber bed.

Matthew Somerset was not breathing.

His bulky frame, honed from working the coalmines since childhood, was impossibly still. Not even a quiver of breath disturbed the bristles of his thick, black beard. Apart from the bloody blemishes on his stitched

leg, his open skin was hauntingly pale and cold. His wide arms hung by his side, one had limp fingers drooped over the edge of the chamber and the other clasped a wedding ring belonging to his beloved wife.

‘Matthew?’

She lifted a quivering finger to his neck in search of a pulse. Her search was in vain. ‘Michael, he’s not breathing.’

The medic was off his feet in a shot but it was already too late. It was possible that the coalminer, who had lost consciousness soon after the procedure started, had passed moments before it ended. His eyes were still open, glazed over with a misty quality like fog.

‘It’s too late,’ Michael did everything he could think of before stepping back, ‘he’s gone.’

Anna looked at him in disbelief, her own vision beginning to cloud as her eyes welled up. Matthew could not be gone; he was the sweetest man she had ever known, innocent beyond his time, a gentleman the likes of which were mythology on the streets of Brooklyn. A decent man from the late nineteenth century who had only ever wanted to return home.

‘Matthew...’

*How am I going to tell Gareth?*

Suddenly Michael snapped. He spun towards the nearby chamber, on which they had stacked the last of their supplies, with a furious swing of his arm. Random items flew into the air. He followed it by kicking the underside of the chamber before scampering back to the corpse and clutching his shirt.

‘Damn it, I’m not losing another one, not like this,’ the teenage medic yelled, his voice filling the motionless laboratory. He started wildly applying his antiquated form of CPR but there was not a breath in Matthew’s body.

‘Michael,’ Denise spoke with barely an ounce of emotion, ‘he’s gone.’

He clenched his futile fists around the shirt collar but knew there was nothing he could do. Breathing heavily, he pulled the coalminer’s limp body up to his face and sobbed bitterly into the shoulder. He had promised Matthew that he would save him and broken that promise.

Anna was about to reach out to comfort him when a miracle happened.

Michael slowly lowered his friend’s body onto the chamber bed. His fingers released the collar and spread across the broad chest of the

coalminer. Weeping softly, he absently massaged Matthew's chest as if hoping to rub life back into his body.

Which is exactly what happened.

Little bolts of static electricity sparkled from the tips of his fingers, creating a flickering blue glimmer in Matthew's chest that glowed beneath his shirt. It reminded Anna of the ocean as viewed through a glass-bottomed boat. It rippled through the coalminer's body as she watched, stunned into silence.

Then the dead man breathed.

The glaze over Matthew's eyes bled away and he sucked in a deep breath, shocking Michael off his shoulder. The coalminer reached an arm forward before falling back against the chamber bed, slowly sucking down oxygen.

'Matthew?'

An unending moment passed before he responded softly. 'Did...you...do...it?'

It was impossible, as unlikely as anything Anna had ever witnessed. The sweet corpse had come back to life, it was undeniable. A miracle even though she did not believe in them.

She laughed in hysterical relief and turned to Denise only to see that there was no such delight in the eyes of the English Rose, which were unblinking and focused on the injured leg in front of her. When Anna glanced down, her shock intensified.

The broken leg, which moments ago had been stitched awkwardly back together under a thin film of crimson blood, was unblemished without as much as a scar.

'He will be fine.'

The only person in the whole facility who did not sound surprised at the sudden resurrection of the coalminer was Claire Stewart.

The redheaded schoolgirl had been sitting forgotten across the room while her interim carer Bryony went in search of Gareth to provide an update. With all focus on the surgery, everyone had forgotten she was even there until she suddenly appeared beside the makeshift operating table.

'Your gift is a special one,' she spoke in that dulcet tone she had adopted since awakening from her second imprisonment in the chamber, 'but he will need rest. There is much to do now that he has come. The flame approaches.'

Frowning, Anna leant forward to catch her vacant gaze. 'Claire, sweetheart, you okay?'

Claire did not reply immediately. Not so much a hesitation, more a pause before processing the next message in her brain. That distant look hovered over the body of Matthew Somerset before she focused on Anna. Slowly, a smile spread unevenly across her freckled face.

'There is no need to call me that any more. You can use my given name, if you must.'

Fear suddenly filled the New Yorker as she swallowed hard. 'What's that, honey?'

'Call me Carbonek.'



## twenty-four

Simon found Katherine sprawled on the jungle floor beside a fallen tree, struggling for breath. Face down, she groaned as she tried rolling onto her side. Concern overtook the emotion that had been dragging him through the jungle and he ran to her side.

‘Katherine,’ he called, skidding to his knees at her side, ‘Kath, you all right?’

The journalist was disoriented and blood was seeping from a small slash across her forehead. He guided her up to a seated position and propped her against the trunk, where she grimaced in pain as she stretched out a knot in her shoulders.

‘JC...’

He frowned, disbelieving. ‘He did this?’

The rapper had been possessed when he stormed back to their impromptu camp a few hours earlier, laying into Tom Kennedy with his flying fists. Despite the stress the kid was under, Simon could not have guessed that he could do this.

*I should see these things coming, he admonished himself before the drill sergeant could get a word in, it's my job to keep them safe, even from each other. A good CO would look out for his unit. Maybe if I'd paid more attention to the kid's state of mind...*

You're only going to be our saviour if you help us, not command us.

Those had been the words of Gareth Oakley. They seemed as old as the words on that epitaph in the graveyard and they had really hurt Simon at the time (so much that he had swept the teacher off his feet and stuck a gun to his head). The suggestion that his approach to command was inappropriate had wounded the marine deeper than any injury. He was effectively the commanding officer and he knew only one way to lead in that situation.

Maybe Teacher had been right.

Maybe leadership was more about listening than talking. If he had paid attention to JC's behaviour, he could have pre-empted this situation. If he had understood Finbarr's concerns, perhaps the Irishman would not have left. If he had listened to Gareth, maybe they would all be on their way home already.

'No,' Katherine sighed, shaking the cobwebs away, 'he ran off. I was chasing him when I tripped. Stupid, that's what it was. Stupid.'

'JC's missing?'

'Yeah, I don't know how long.'

Simon clenched his fists. 'Tom's missing too.'

The journalist glanced up, realising the significance. They had been on the verge of killing each other earlier and they were both unaccounted for in the great expanse of the unending jungle. If they found each other first...

Or maybe they were looking for each other.

'We've got to find them.'

When she tried to move, fresh pain stopped her. Simon unclenched his fist to sweep a strand of her long dark hair from her eyes. His fingers graced the skin of her cheek as they moved. Their eyes only met for an instant before he turned his attention towards the wound on her head.

'You're bleeding,' he spoke softly, 'can you walk?'

Katherine hesitated as she regained her composure. Looking away, she pulled herself up against the tree until she was standing on shaky legs. Simon offered his hand but she managed by herself.

'I'll live. Let's get going; we've got three people to find now.'

The marine could not help himself. 'You remind me of my ex-girlfriend, you know? Jayne. She never let anything stop her doing things herself.'

He cleared his throat as Jayne's voice had to add a stipulation in his head.

*Even you, Simon.*

'This way.'

He started walking around the base of the fallen tree, heading in a northerly direction where the tree line was densest. Katherine frowned, stumbled forward until her legs started working again and called after him.



‘I think JC ran this way, back down the hill.’

He turned and surveyed the southerly direction she was pointing. It also seemed to be the way he believed Tom had been heading after the only trail he found comprised of a few large footprints. The rapper and the convict seemed destined for a collision somewhere in that direction, a confrontation likely to end badly.

‘This way.’

Simon continued northward as the journalist jogged gingerly to catch up. He had no logical reason to go in that direction and time was no longer on his side. But something was propelling him forward, something more real than the logic pulling him the other way.

‘Why are we going this way?’

He did not answer her question, afraid of the answer himself.

‘Simon, talk to me.’

They pushed through the overhanging branches and creeping vines that cluttered the ground. A more difficult path in the wrong direction when time was of the essence.

‘What about Liz,’ she asked, sounding desperately confused as she struggled to match his pace, ‘did you find her?’

‘Not yet.’

As they pushed through the underbrush, Simon kept his gaze focused ahead. Every difficult step increased the intensity of the emotion that had been dragging him through the jungle.

Hope.

He had absolutely no reason to feel hope. Three of his team were missing, two seemed on a violent collision course and there was still no sign of anything in this jungle worthy of inspiring hope. Since the river, they had seen nothing but a few crazy birds, some fragments of metal and a possible meteor impact crater.

But there was something tempting him to move forward.

*You’re losing your mind, soldier, the drill sergeant barked angrily, and it’s going to get you killed. Reading alien inscriptions, putting your faith in a distant twinkling light, walking absently in no direction...all sure signs of craziness. You’re no longer fit to lead this expedition.*

*Maybe...but I’ve still got to see it.*

*What, exactly?*

*No idea. I just know I’ve got to see it.*

Suddenly sunlight began to penetrate the foliage ahead. The density of the jungle was dissipating.

Simon picked up his pace, pushing harder through the underbrush. Katherine followed in his wake, her anxieties mounting.

‘Simon, please, let’s go back. We might still be able to catch up with the others. Besides, I don’t think Liz would’ve come this way. The trees are just too difficult to get through, why would she even try?’

He could no longer reply. The need to move forward was sparking every cell in his body into life, overwhelming any other desire or emotion. Whatever was happening to him, whatever strange force had made him read that epitaph and driven him towards this place, it possessed him totally.

‘Simon, where are we going?’

Katherine’s last words were shrill with her concern; he was not listening to her, which went against the promise he had made. She was on the verge of panicking when the marine burst through the last cluster of trees and stopped cold.

She followed him into a small clearing on the brink of a steep slope, a dizzying descent down the far side of the hill they had been climbing all day. There were no trees on this slope, just an almost vertical drop covered in grey dirt without so much as a blade of grass poking through. It allowed a breathtaking view down into a small valley circled by four identical hills.

Whatever Katherine’s next words were going to be, they were cut short by the sight of what nestled in that valley.

A huge stone spike protruded from the centre of the valley, so high that it towered above them on top of the hillside. Over two hundred metres high, it was the same design as the monument in the graveyard only lined with a swirling pattern of orange metal tattooed on the sides. On top, a massive prism cut like a diamond reflected the light of dusk into a glittering sparkle that could be seen for miles. It reflected the light like the glass bubble at the centre of the courtyard dome, filling the valley with kaleidoscope colours.

The spike was not what caught Katherine’s breath.

It sat in the centre of a city.

There were stone ruins at the bottom of the valley, grand structures crumbling from erosion. Dozens of buildings dotted around the centre spike in ever decreasing circles within circles. From this height, they could see large structures in the centre of the city like communal

buildings. Amphitheatres and market places, maybe. Though it was ancient and rundown, the city was the clearest sign of a civilisation on this world.

‘We’re going to Ka-na,’ Simon answered resolutely without meeting Katherine’s wide-eyed gaze, ‘because that’s where we’re going to find the way home.’



## twenty-five

‘GARETH!’

The unexpected kiss a young Gareth Oakley had fantasised about lasted barely an instant. It was the kind of kiss that made young men believe in miracles but a distant voice shattered the memorable moment by screaming his name. He lifted his head from the tender embrace with the First Dame of the Silver Screen and stared across the stone bridge spanning the expanse of the chasm.

A man was running across the bridge, pushing every ounce of energy into his flailing legs. Blood poured down the side of his dirty face. His expression was etched in panic as his hard, rugged jaw stretched wide in a cry that echoed along the valley with a faint Irish melody.

‘Finbarr?’ Bryony, who had turned in Gareth’s arms to follow his gaze, exclaimed softly. ‘Gareth, it’s Finbarr. He’s coming.’

Gareth could not respond because he had noticed what the Irishman was carrying.

The Middle Eastern boy without a name was unconscious in his arms. His shoulder was bandaged heavily, his clothes were dirtier than Finbarr’s and his arms flopped loosely in his lap. The poor boy, who had been through so much already, appeared to be on the brink of death.

‘Shoot him, Gareth.’

Finbarr O’Driscoll’s cry created identical frowns across both Gareth’s and Bryony’s face. The Irish bartender was running towards them holding the child aloft like an offering and asking Gareth to shoot him. It made no sense...

Then they both saw what Finbarr was running from.

Further back along the bridge, running even more wildly in pursuit, was Ganesh Omar. The middle-aged Indian professor had the same dishevelled appearance in his grubby clothes and his greying hair was

matted with dirt but there was more to his appearance. Ganesh threw his head back and screamed savagely, a primal howl that echoed around the world.

‘Feck’s sake, shoot him,’ Finbarr yelled above the roaring sound of the waterfall beneath the bridge.

‘Finbarr,’ Bryony shouted, screaming almost. She began running towards them, driven by an irrational instinct to help. Panicking, Gareth grabbed her arm before she could get too far.

*I can’t take the risk...*

There was a flash of panic across Bryony’s blue eyes as he pulled out the futuristic weapon he had promised to dispose of and aimed for the crazed professor. The similarity to the dream he had woken up from days ago was beyond eerie. This time, he raised his weapon knowing that his actions were intended to protect Bryony, not harm her.

*You’re not really going to do this, are you Gaz? You’ve never fired a gun in your life and you’re about to shoot an unarmed man just because Finbarr tells you. Ganesh was really attached to that kid, maybe it’s Finbarr you should shoot.*

Then he noticed the Indian’s eyes.

Ganesh’s eyes were completely blood red and wide open as he screamed savagely at the fleeing Irishman, a scream that echoed around the world. It was more than just “a little bloodshot”, his once hazel eyes were completely covered by red mist. Even with the distance between them, the redness burned with a powerful fluorescence.

‘Gareth!’ Bryony screamed, her contorted features reminding him of his premonition.

*What are you going to do, Gaz?*

His instincts took over, his eyes narrowed and his finger squeezed the trigger.

Blue flames erupted from the barrels, followed hastily by a sonic boom backfiring up his arm. Something connected with Ganesh’s chest thirty feet away, exploding in his stomach. The impact knocked him backwards with such velocity, his momentum stopped dead.

Gareth’s eyes widened as he realised what he had just done. He watched in horror as Ganesh Omar pivoted around drunkenly and stumbled sideways over the wall.

The professor’s body twisted as it plummeted through the air, gravity dragging his smouldering corpse hundreds of feet down into the ravine. There was no sound, not even the wind whistling through his flapping,

crimson shirt. Even the blood trail disappeared in the mist of the waterfall.

‘What’ve I done?’

Bryony was motionless at his side. Her gaze wavered between his eyes, his weapon and the bottom of the ravine where the body had disappeared. Neither of them could think of an appropriate answer.

*I’ve got an answer for you, Gaz. You broke your promise that there would only be two deaths on this planet...did it in a big way, too. You’ve also shown Bryony that you can’t be trusted to tidy up your own mistakes, keeping that gun. Worse of all, you shot an innocent man without cause or provocation. After promising nobody else would die, you killed a man, Gaz!*

He had betrayed them all.

‘Gareth...’

They both snapped out of their shock at Finbarr’s exhausted groan. The Irishman staggered off the bridge before his legs buckled, sending him crashing to his knees under the weight of the unconscious urchin in his hands. He rocked backwards against the stone barrier, eyes flickering.

‘Finbarr,’ Bryony yelled, running towards him. It was the sound of her voice that broke Gareth’s paralysis. She sounded worried. He followed before sprinting past her and reaching the flailing Irishman.

His clothes were torn and grubby, tainted with blood. His white shirt was unrecognisable and the buttons had been ripped off his chest. His short, unkempt hair was tacky from a partially dried wound on the base of his skull.

The Middle Eastern boy was in an even worse condition. Unconscious, his appearance was pale and weak. His right shoulder had been bandaged with dirty gauze while his left arm hung limply at his side. A fresh scar was still knitting itself shut across his forehead; it reminded Gareth of a lobotomy incision.

*Somebody tried cutting this boy’s head open,* he realised in horror.

‘Finbarr,’ he whispered, clasping the Irishman’s shoulder gently, ‘it’s Gareth. What happened?’

The Irishman’s attention snapped back into place but he was in a bad condition. His mouth was cracked, his eyes dry and his rugged jaw hung awkwardly as he tried to smile.

‘We...made it.’ His eyes flickered as he fought a losing battle against consciousness.

‘Please, God, no,’ Bryony whimpered, a hand quivering in front of her mouth.

‘You think God can save any of you,’ a voice spoke suddenly from behind them.

Gareth turned to see a plain woman with a lean body and mousey hair tinged with grey dangling over eyes that shone a shade of sapphire. Her blue skirt was grimy and the sleeves of her blouse were rolled up to her elbows ready for toil. Gareth had never seen the woman before but there was a pale familiarity about her.

The woman glared at Bryony with enough venom to stop Gareth’s words in his mouth.

‘This is where you’re going to die, dear. I could have told you on the day you left me that you’d die a horrible death alone. If you’d actually listened to me...’

Bryony rounded on the woman, unaware Gareth was watching. ‘I’m through listening to you, Mom. Get out of my head, now!’

*Mom...*

‘Bryony,’ his words finally escaped in a whisper, ‘um...who is that?’

Both Bryony and the woman turned to him with identical expressions illuminated with identical green eyes. Then they glanced at each other with almost comic timing before turning back.

‘You see her?’ Bryony asked breathlessly.

He was about to answer when he noticed that the woman had disappeared.

*You’re not crazy, Gaz. I saw her too.*

Anna had hit on the idea when she discovered the lobotomised pieces of brains in jars. The clues had been all around; Bryony’s visions manifesting before her, Tanya’s coloured mists, Anna’s tricks with Tarot cards, his own prophetic gifts. All results of alien experimentation.

*They gave us extraordinary mental gifts...but why?*

*They didn’t give you gifts, Gaz. Isn’t it obvious? The gifts were just a side effect. The real question is what did they hope to achieve by changing you?*

Before he could ask the First Dame of the Silver Screen how her mother had mysteriously appeared then disappeared into thin air like a ghost, Finbarr spluttered a dry cough that brought their attention back to him.



With the last of his strength he pushed the boy towards Gareth, who lifted him into his lap and felt heat radiating off the frail body. His eyelids flickered but there was no awareness or consciousness in him.

‘Finbarr,’ Gareth tried a little harsher, gripping the Irishman’s shoulders tightly to shake him to his senses, ‘where are the others? What the Hell happened to Ganesh, huh? Finbarr, what happened to you?’

With a quiver, Finbarr finally fell into the abyss of unconsciousness but before he gave in, his left hand opened and a diamond necklace tumbled out onto the grey dirt. It dazzled in the evening light, a precious stone more beautiful than anything Gareth had ever seen on a teacher’s salary.

Bryony leant over and slowly picked it up, turning it over in her hand. The diamond reflected in the tears staining her emerald eyes.

Gareth watched the Irishman slip away and four words spilled out of his mouth with his last conscious breath. Those words painted a picture of horror with Gareth’s features as he stared beyond the bridge towards the wild jungle beyond.

‘The...angels...are...coming.’



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