

Nalbo-for-short as he often introduced himself should've been at his telescope already. The twilight had set in properly and Timpson still had him by the arm to help keep his drunken balance.

"Seriously, Nalbo," Timpson said again. "Your house on this little outrider-hill is ideal. With it as our watchpost, we'll be sitting pretty to spy the danger from the east before it hits us. You do see that, don't you?" He waited for Nalbo to see it.

Nalbo might as well give the man what he needed, maybe weasel him away. When Timpson was drunk—*drunk as a lord I might as well say*—there was no gainsaying Timpson.

"Because my house stands out front, higher than your house behind it, like a sentinel at the open mouth of the valley?"

"You got it," Timpson said. "Learnt your lesson well." He allowed Nalbo to lead him to the beginning of what Nalbo and Claire now called Timpson's track between their houses.

Nalbo raised his head for a naked-eye sighting. The first stars twinkled in the violet-red sky. *Nope. Apart from the stars, nothing to see yet.* And anyway, what would a piece of the mysterious satellite orbiting Earth even look like?

The satellite itself, settling in an orbit of Earth fifty years previously, ruined the electronic communications of the time and so everything that dependant on telecommunications. Nalbo and his far-flung astronomy club communicated by pigeon post. He chuckled darkly. *Though me personally not keeping pigeons.* He took his and Claire's mail to the Hillet Emporium because Nance still subsidized a mail-run to the coast.

But the rest of them in the club by way of their rice-paper slips, had calculated a west-to-east trajectory that lapped the Earth twice, and that would see any fragments burn in the atmosphere. Nalbo picked up the postcard pertaining from the Emporium two days ago and he planned to see both passes.

Timpson gripped Nalbo's arm to stop from tripping over his own feet.

Since the Timpsons had moved in next door, Nalbo often regretted the track, and indeed the spine joining their two little hills. Claire was away with Allie Timpson at a plant dye workshop so Nalbo had no help wrenching the conversation away from Timpson's paranoia.

They arrived at the little gate. When Timpson was sober, he stepped over it while laughing at Nalbo's wonky carpentry. Nalbo fenced the top of the hill to stop his dogs wandering and the little gate was a remnant from the past—a repurposed baby-gate—that neither Claire nor Nalbo could bear to throw out. Nalbo opened the gate and encouraged his guest through by disengaging his arm.

Timpson stopped. "We will have depredations as soon as the whole caboodle outside goes up! Sooner than you think! What about that satellite set to drop out of the sky? Wham!" He slammed his fist into his palm. "There goes one of the islands, for example! A rearrangement of sea levels and hey presto!? The presenter said people in hidden valleys will have to carry civilisation ..."

Nalbo knew Timpson's arguments by heart. He forestalled Timpson's next words "...when night falls everywhere else."

“Makes sense to prepare,” Timpson said without missing a beat.

*Their* hidden valley was enclosed by forested uplands north and south. On the western heights, farms surrounded the little river there, before it overflowed into the valley. Spectacularly so after rain, so that the only road in, because it shared the narrow defile with the creek, was often closed.

Out in front, in the east, although the valley was open to anybody, the seasonal boggiess largely kept people out. There the land lay untamed, growing wild grass and sedges among marsh-ponds . And clumps of spiky trees. When the muddy central creek flowed, it eventually lapped the walled suburbs near the coast. Bushwalkers—anybody with a grain of sense and or self-preservation—kept to the uplands, but Timpson was not to be convinced.

The man himself took hold of Bonalbo’s jacket-front to get his attention. “You should point your telescope toward the land instead of the sky. And, as I have said numerous times, we should clear the swamp so we will see whoever tries to come up that way.”

Nalbo wanted to be up in his observatory. The night was progressing. “I’ll think about it,” he said.

Timpson expelled a deep sigh. He released Nalbo’s jacket, “Mate, you don’t know what good you’ve done me. I’ll be able to sleep tonight.”

*Is he serious?*

“I’ll start bringing over the weaponry first thing in the morning.”

*Damn! He is serious! Hope he’s drunker than he looks and wakes up embarrassed.*

“Also in the morning, I’ll put the hard word on Smith across the way,” Timpson said. He turned for home by way of the trail of reflective white stones he’d painted and laid along the path to save having to remember to carry a torch.

*Should I signal Smith? Nalbo wondered. Warn him that a paranoid with a fortress mentality is coming over to talk him into joining his house to a fortification of the valley? My dot-dashing isn’t that good.*

Glumly he recalled that Smith lived alone and that Smith seized the chance for a yarn however it came. *I just don’t have the time tonight. I’ll wander across the valley early in the morning, when Timpson is still nursing his head.*

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Nalbo bounded up the spiralling iron stair to his observatory. The still stupid young dog competed with him for first arrival. “Heel, damn it! Heel!” All Nalbo needed was for Claire to find him at the bottom of the stairs with a broken neck. How she would manage Timpson was the only interesting conjecture arising. Jazz, their old dog, followed Nalbo sedately.

He’d set up the scope this afternoon on the observatory’s narrow veranda with the barrel sticking out beyond the roof. As he quartered the area of sky where the object was meant to be, Nalbo shook his head at Timpson’s perversity in picking up only on the global disaster stuff.

There, he had it in his sight! Still only looking like a fast-moving star that barrelled up over the back of the valley. Was Cele, at her fancy wool-dye workshop, watching for it as well?

It was larger already than he'd expected. Going fast enough that the scope was difficult to keep focussed. Nalbo swung the telescope in a smooth arc to follow the satellite to the horizon in the east. He swung the barrel back to the west and waited.

Inside, under the table, Jazz whined her usual the-sky-is-falling refrain. Nalbo spent the forty minutes counting the minutes on his old watch and imagining Marina's life if she'd lived. A young woman now. Might she bring her young man home soon? Claire and Nalbo could do with some happy news. He wouldn't mind another grandchild with Callum getting too big for fairy stories and no longer believing that little people lived behind the little front door Granddad Nalbo fixed on a stump in the swamp.

*Snap out of it, old man.* Luckily, he'd planned the trajectory and had taken the telescope out on the veranda for maximum follow-through, because there it was! Look at the thing! Twice as big as the first time and flaming like a star! It had to be zipping through the stratosphere already!

Big, bigger, biggest. It arced down. Nalbo stepped away from the scope. But no way could he watch it bare-eyed as it sputtered down, down, bright as the sun even through his hands over his eyes

*Woomph!* The fire ball exploded. Or hit the ground. The house shuddered. Nalbo clutched for the veranda rail, deafened but conscious of a shower of glass fragments raining down. *The solar panels, probably.*

Out front, mid-field, dozens of pieces of something floated down into the swamp.

*Huh?* Sputtering embers burned their shapes onto his retinas. *Parachutes?*

He blinked and blinked but the darkness near at hand was absolute. The emergency nightlights were gone along with the solar panels and every other breakable. He decided things without thinking. *Not sweeping glass now! Wait for daylight. In the morning the whole world will be out here searching for the fall-site. Wild horses cannot stop me trying to be there first.*

He strode through the kitchen gathering stuff into the small backpack. A couple of handfuls of trail-mix for breakfast. Snake-bite kit from the first aid drawer. The thermos of coffee he'd prepped for his watch. A bottle of drinking water in case he got lost. Map from the bookshelves.

Torch, compass and pocket knife from his survival gear in the laundry. Where he also pulled his sock-protectors up over his boots and around his pant cuffs, the tops elasticised above his ankles to stop ticks and leeches crawling up his legs. In the last few seconds, he snatched his waterproofs against the wet cold of early morning fog.

The moon was up now and the gardens lay silvered under its calm shine. He still couldn't hear anything. The house hunkered to his left like a dark stone heap. He shut the dogs in the garden shed, where there was no glass underfoot. Then tramped to the edge of the northern slopes terracing down the hill with low-growing crops.

Timpson had a horror of tall plants. “The cover provided by corn and staked tomatoes would allow a raiding party to oust us in three minutes. To repulse invaders, they have to be seen in good time.”

Nalbo allowed the man his foibles because there was Claire’s friendship with Allie to think about. Coming to the valley, Claire missed Matt and Belle and Callum, their son, daughter-in-law and grandson. The young people rarely came despite the specially furnished spare bedroom-and-annex.

While having Allie might make it up to Claire for not having Belle, Timpson was a wild card who in no way compared to having Matt. So instead, Nalbo grew silverbeet and carrots and parsley on his slopes.

In the winter just gone, Timpson convinced Nalbo to join him at mosaic-burning in the swamp. “To keep the grasses and sedges from becoming a jungle in summer,” Timpson said.

Nalbo agreed after a longtime Hillet farmer told him how the swamp’s carrying-capacity improved under a regime of patchy burnings. By carrying-capacity Nalbo’s farmer-friend meant the number of animals and other creatures that could live in the place.

Timpson considered Nalbo and himself the valley’s gatekeepers. Nalbo thought of himself as a steward of the land.

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Nalbo walked along the narrow paths made by swamp wallabies, picking ways to always steer toward the pink glow in the northeast. In the grey dawn he estimated that he’d walked for about four hours. Four kilometres per hour made that about sixteen. *Not bad for an old man.*

Though the glow in the sky had faded, he knew he approached the fall-ground by the burned grass and sedges here and there. He saw that most of the fire close by was out, leaving blackened vegetation that still gave off a wisping acrid smoke to tickle his nose and sting his eyes.

What he couldn’t understand was why he hadn’t met anyone? Nearly every man and woman he knew in Hillet walked comfortably at six or seven clicks an hour. *Why aren’t they here yet, hunting souvenirs?* “Hallooo!” he called to make sure he was alone.

Only the silence of the bush. Not even any birds? Where’s the dawn chorus? *The birds are deafened as I was? Every critter has flown?*

He pulled aside the overgrowth of a couple of tussocks of strappy lomandra plants. The path continued underneath. Beyond the giant tussocks, to the right of the path, lay a couple of square metres of blackened vegetation with a few tendrils of smoke.

He neared a something unburnt at the far end of the clearing, half under a singed tussock. *It crawled there?* He couldn’t make sense of it. *What is that?* Closed his eyes to reset his brain. Opened them. He stepped forward for a better look.

Stopped. *A forearm that looks like.* He stroked his own forearm to convince himself that the thing that lay there looked like a forearm. *As long and thick as mine. But ending in a hand*

*with two parallel thumbs.* His gaze dwelt on the parallelism. He looked away.

That re-setting again. *It's not working!* He looked back at the hand, counted the fingers. Five, bunched, but looking like they were attached by a Frankenstein-ian carpenter. He grinned fiercely to keep his fright behind his teeth.

Grabbed a stick to push the singed plant aside, so he could see more of the arm. The arm's skin was as thin and blotched as old rice paper.

The stick slipped in his sweaty hand and poked the arm.

The arm *wrenched* away from his stick!

Nalbo stepped back, shuddered. *The arm is attached to a body and it's alive?* He dropped the stick. *My knife?* He thrust his hand into his pocket and rooted around. *Got it.* Fumbled the knife out. *Do not drop it!* Unfolded it. Held the haft in his curved fingers, the blade out between them. He breathed, feeling slightly more secure.

He stood a long moment, semi-crouched, tasting the silence. He heard no wind. No voices. No farm pumps clattering and echoing through the valley. Near at hand his own panting. He closed his mouth, breathed courage into himself.

Pocketing the knife for a minute, he bent the strappy grass away from where the other end of the arm might be, expecting a large man just starting to wake. *Poor fellow. So broken.*

A thirty-centimetre mannikin lay at the base of the tussock! *No taller than from my elbow to mid-palm!* How could that be attached to the arm?

A dark, wide-awake eye sprang open in the middle of the little face.

Nalbo reared up and back and falling onto the tussock behind him, slid down. To ground level.

Where a second eye blinked at him from among the fingers of the hand, at the level with his own eyes.

He clambered to his feet in a hurry. Ran a few paces. *Go back?* Nothing more moved. He strained his ears for sound. *Nothing. Go on? A souvenir, remember? The club.*

He abandond what he didn't understand and tiptoed to a further circle of singed vegetation. At *its* green edges lay bits of a torn brown fabric. *Remnants of the parachutes?*

He bent closer. Saw fleshy bloody edges! He heard his own sudden intake of breath. There were too many scraps, he saw at a glance, representing too great a wing-area for the remains to be of a fruit bat accidentally caught up in the disaster.

*Two* fruit bats? Where are the bodies? He searched by staying rooted to the ground, turning on the spot like a broken clockwork toy. He *saw* fragments of fleshy organs, breathing still and bleeding. He *heard* distressed human-like sounds, like hacking, and coughing, which suggested a set of deeply scarred lungs.

Exhaustion stole over him. The sun beat down on him. *Forgot my hat, leaving home in the dark. Go sit under the tree.* He stumbled toward it. Dropped to the brittle leaves at the base.

*Blessed shade.*