

Nalbo checked the outlook with his telescope morning and evening. Every early morning so far, the alien creatures—in individual mode—swarmed up the slope between the two houses and adjacent to the swamp, apparently to sun themselves in its shelter. The slope cleared by Tim and now clad with soft short grass. The irony smacked Nalbo in the gob every time.

From about ten, all the creatures rose and walked, tripped, strode, dribbled and rolled back down the hill and into the long grass. About half an hour later, he'd see an augmented conglomerate, as in more creatures hung onto the basic shape that he knew. Steered by her highness the four-year-old Earth-origin human child—he was sure only of that fact, that Ne-Ne was originally from Earth—the conglomerate stepped from the strip of bush dividing the swamp from civilization.

As soon as the conglomerate encountered a crop, it began shedding riders. Quite soon the scene was of a troop of critters grazing industriously. Where they'd been was bare ground. With the field razed, they then formed into a military tank-like shape. Nalbo recalled visiting *Mephisto*, a historical military tank displayed in a museum in Brisbane. *That shape if not the height and width.* He definitely wouldn't like to get too close to this one to measure it, despite that the critters gave him back his hand.

This morning he waited until he saw them run, if that's how they moved the tank-shape, into the west. *Good. But watch out all you people there.* He made a sort of haste then, getting ready for his walk into Hillet. He aimed to be away just a few hours but you never knew. He dressed for bush-bashing, with leather gaiters to protect his legs against thorns, snakes and paralysis ticks.

His first short-cut was straight down the hill instead of following the lazy zig zag of the drive. The sandy road along the base of the Timpson homestead lay silent. All of its five hundred meter length were trodden with alien tracks. No birds and no insects blurted about their presence. Were they eaten, or just too weirded to stay? He hurried despite knowing the aliens to be absent in the next valley along.

With a sigh of relief, he dived down the cutting across the S bends and arrived at the bridge over the creek a respectable twenty minutes later. Out of breath. The same way back—uphill—would be much harder. While walking over the bridge and along the tarred section, he worked on controlling his breathing, so he could *stride* into the pub. Like he was a confident man of the world, for a change.

“Open?” he said as he walked in the front door.

“All hours are the new hours while the emergency lasts,” Jum, the publican, said. “This and the Emporium are the only places to get news. They'll be different flavours.”

“That's what I'm after, news in flavours,” Nalbo said. “Here first, it looks like.” *So far, so good.*

A bit of a crowd, maybe half a dozen customers, gathered round the one and only table. *Is there even a vacant chair?* The bar stools at the counter were the most uncomfortable affairs in creation and anyway, Jum didn't encourage drinking at the bar. Nalbo stood, feeling—and therefore *looking* he was sure—increasingly like an unwelcome stranger.

“Nalbo. For pity’s sake come and sit down.”

Ah. His good friend Careth. Someone who knew Nalbo’s ways. Nalbo sat down in the chair pulled out for him. “How’s it going?” he said to the table in general.

“Haven’t seen him around,” said the man sitting opposite. He sounded suspicious. “What would we want with visitors now?”

“Easy!” Jum said. He set a beer on a coaster in front of Nalbo. “You don’t get out and about enough, Sile. This is Nalbo King. Lives on the promontory. Nalbo, meet Sile, our sileage hero. He hates people calling him Silly, for obvious reasons. Sile is a man who hires other people to farm his land while he works indoors at ... what do you work at, Sile?”

“Thank you, Jum,” Sil said tartly. “Trying to design a better product, as you well know.”

Nalbo glanced up. The things Jum wasn’t saying lay ready on Jum’s lips but he was a good publican, a diplomat by nature.

“Not a visitor,” Careth added. “The house between here and them is the Timpsons. I might go see Tim this afternoon. Could use one of his guns.”

Nalbo choked on his beer. Coughed. “Don’t,” he croaked. “Don’t go see Tim. We’ve got Allie, Mrs Tim, with us. I don’t know where Tim is. The monsters took against him. Their house is ...” He shuddered and he didn’t need to act. “Their house is a splintered ruin.”

It was enough to get all of them shuddering. And talking. The news he’d been after.

“I suppose Tim went out after dark? You do *not* want to be out and about at night,” said the fellow on the other side of Careth. “I only stood at my back step. I saw a darkness the size of a military tank at the edge of one of my new fields. In the morning, that field—my bok-choy crop—was grazed down to dirt-level. You all know how fast that will regrow? Like, never?”

“Not the work of feral goats, or wallabies, none of their tracks were around,” said one of his friends. “We all went and had a look,” he explained.

“Smith from across the valley reckoned your place might’ve burned in the fall. Lot of smoke. Even flames he said,” Careth said. “When we didn’t hear anything, we thought you’d left without saying. Didn’t hold it against you. A lot of people did the first week. Lost their nerve and they were out of here.”

Jum served another round and dragged up a chair to sit down with them. “The next valley over, might’ve been getting resentful of the stories we were telling them. Their swamp borders ours. This morning, they’re telling tales like you wouldn’t believe except at a horror fest.”

“Try me,” Nalbo said. Their talk criss-crossed. He didn’t try to keep track of who said what. Everyone had a thing they wanted known. All of them important details of the big picture.

“They had a crowd of youngsters deciding to guard a swamp-bordering field,” Jum said. “Strawberries for their Strawberry Fest, you know, to be harvested the next day. Youngsters were concerned about competitors stealing their best fruit and all that.”

“As youngsters will,” Careth said.

“The field was an eighth of a hectare, not much bigger than a house plot. Two or three of the kids watched at each of half a dozen fires yarning the night away, just the kind of adventure they like.”

“Foggy that night,” Sile said.

“Yes,” Jum said. “The fog off the swamp got so thick that once the boys and girls sat or lay down, only the glow of their fires could be seen by the next crew along. When in the morning bright sunlight took the place of the mist, two of the fires were untended.”

“I went across the hill to see the tracks,” said someone. “Seeing if they were the same as the tracks here, you know. Knowing your enemy and all that. Saw a couple of prints of bare feet, a trail of blood and a few bone-splinters. All there was.”

Nalbo started to wheeze.

“The remaining kids fetched home to get their fathers, guns and dogs. So by mid-morning an army arrived carrying a forest of guns. All the dogs in the neighborhood were leashed and readied. Though the dogs had to be pulled along and one after the other wrenched loose and took off home.”

“Because it was all of them no-one is calling the dogs cowards,” Careth said.

“What did the men and kids do?” Nalbo said, breathing raggedly.

“They’d lost enough, old man. They went home.”

“You know something more,” Jum said at Nalbo. “The state you’re in.”

Not a question. “Allie’s story. She came at daybreak of the night after she and Clare got back from that workshop they went to. As she tells it, Timpson took his guns into the swamp the minute of the fall. Went and shot things in the swamp. That night they came for him, the rest of them, and dragged him out of bed first by his foot, then his neck. He broke, according to Allie, and I believe her, the way she tells it. Allie was too scared to move till daybreak. Claire and I had no idea. We heard nothing.”

Nalbo downed half his beer. *Take it easy, old timer. There’s only a half-truth hidden in amongst the facts.* “Couple of days later, Claire said they’d fetch some of Allie’s clothes. They found the house ruined, splintered. No clothes not in pieces barring Allie’s wedding dress. Which she is wearing day and night.”

“Why aren’t you in town already?” said Sile. “Staying here, for example.”

Nalbo shrugged. He didn’t have a reasonable, good enough reason. “The creatures are in the swamp. Quite close to the ridge. The shelter from the wind, I suppose. You think we should’ve come when?”

“You’re here now. What’s different about today?”

Nalbo nodded. “I repaired my telescope, found the spare lenses still whole in their leather casings. I had thought it useless to look as everything else in the house is broken. So. Using

the telescope I saw the tank-shape taking off into the west. At a fast clip. Seen it move?"

A couple nodded. "Go on," Jum said.

"I said to Claire she should stay home with Allie. No use both of us risking our lives at the same time. Not till we know more."

"*Where* did you say?" Careth said.

"Taking off into the west, up the valley," Nalbo said again.

One of the men blanched. "Wife and kids there and I'm here. I've got to go!"

"Where do you live exactly?" Nalbo said.

"South of the Spine, house is near the wall."

The Spine being the main road. House near the valley's wall. "Is there a way down the wall if you travelled along the top? Do that. Go up by the switch-back. Also from up on the wall you'll be able to spot it."

"Why?"

"Is anybody keeping track of the dead?" Nalbo said. Lot of heads shook. *They haven't got it yet.* "You want to dedicate the center post to that, Jum?" he said.

Jum nodded, started raising his bulk from the chair. "Looks to me like we need something. You or me?"

"You," Nalbo said. "I mightn't always be here. Start high. Put up a stroke for Timpson."

"How many kids did they lose that night?" Jum said generally.

"I'll be off," said the man living up the valley. "Forget about the switch-back. Take me all day."

Nalbo pushed back from the table. "Something my father always said. A dead fool is no use to anybody. A live fool only to his kids and kin." He nodded at the rest, and from them to the fool, giving them the job of talking him out of his foolishness. "I'm off to the Emporium."

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The Hillet Emporium was cool and dark. Flies lazed in a swarm near the rafters. Nancy and Maeve purchased the old town hall for their house and shop. An architect-job inside it gave them this high, rafted space for the shop, and a two-storey apartment at the rear. A big space needs a big name, hence the Emporium.

Nalbo relaxed. Nancy and Maeve were good friends.

Nance sat behind the counter. The way she knitted, so nervily, told him her state of mind. Pulling the work tight. She'd have to frog half of it before long. "Maeve not here?"

"Babies don't pick good times to be born."

“That’s a fact,” he said. “Where did she go? South or north of the Spine?”

“North. Does it make a difference?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “Claire and I are staying to study it. Them. For the good of humankind,” he added quickly. Behind her back but not out of his hearing, people often said Claire cared only about the environment.

“I know what you meant,” Nance said. “Good. I’m glad. Maeve will be too. Somebody needs to do it.” She dropped her knitting in the basket beside her and wrenched herself up out of the chair. “You’ll need stores. Two of everything we have. I’ve instituted rations.”

“We have Allie with us. But not Tim. The aliens don’t suffer fools.”

“Hmph. Can I say he’s no loss? I didn’t suffer him either. Three of each, then. Maeve will bring them. Once we know its movements, we’ll send a truck to the coast for more stores. Anything you need now?”

“A can of peaches for Claire. I’ve got a spare telescope, its lenses broken due to the fall, you know?”

She smiled about the peaches. Nodded. “The weirdest things broke. Things you wouldn’t expect to.”

“My second one I repaired with spare lenses still whole in their leather pouch, and I am using it to track the aliens’ movements. If you can get replacement lenses, I’ll repair the other one and you can have it here. Set up a watch tower in your attic.”

“That’s good!” She laughed. Set the can of peaches by his bag. “It’ll have to be someone other than me getting up there. Got the details?”

He slid the envelope across. “Letter and measurements. Friend in the Coo-Tha Astronomers. Do you mind if I sneak a look up there now?” He patted the barrel of his second-best telescope.

“Be my guest! I wish I could get up there myself!”

He climbed the ladder. Set the tripod on the shelf under the round window and slotted the barrel into its seating. Peered through the eye piece. Marveled at the wide brown track criss-crossing the fields. Thankfully, no one was abroad, despite it being a fresh working day. The thing or things grazed and crept slowly back the way he and they had come. *I need to hurry home.*

He packed up the scope and stumbled down the ladder stairs. Bumped his head twice on the low jambs. Hit his knee against one of the central uprights. Noticed only the time it took him. “It’s coming back this way, grazing. I need to go home while I can.”

“Walk me to the pub on your way,” Nance said. “I’ll sit with Jum and frog this mess over a beer.”

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While hurrying home, Nalbo took the long easier slope from the bridge directly to their

plantation. The old path still existing under the regrowth of tussock grass and wild tea-tree.
Good to know.

The shed looked like home with a twist of smoke skirling from the chimney. He chuckled.
Claire's home. Knocked like he was a visitor.

She at the door, drawing him into the cabin. "Got some news?"

"None of it good," he said. "But I've got you the peaches. Keep them for after or have them first?"

"Start the telling while I make the tea." She took the can out of his hands, smacked a kiss on his cheekbone. Set the can ready for him to open it.

He started by describing the alien tracks on the sand at the base of the Timpsons's. About a dozen different footprints. Talked about the news he heard in the pub. "They don't get it yet," he said about the men around the table, repeating it to himself "I've got a nasty suspicion it's all men so far. Who've been taken."

Claire set a pair of little dishes with peaches in their juice on the table. Teaspoons with them. Poured the tea, the camping mug now for himself while she took the golden syrup can with a hole in the rim to allow drinking without spilling.

"Did that for Maeve," she said, seeing where he looked. "Thought I might as well use it as you like your tea hotter than I do, and have been putting up with it luke for my sake."

"Any time, my love."

"The victims all male when the creatures in the conglomerate are nearly all female?" she said. "There has got to be a good reason for that."

"Well, just in case you're thinking of asking them it, we don't know their language," Nalbo said, only half-joking.

"We don't know their language *yet*," Claire said.

"All I ask is that you don't take any *stupid* risks. On your toes the whole time. Not that you'll outrun any of them except perhaps Ne-ne."