

**COLD
PEOPLE
TOM ROB
SMITH**



**SIMON &
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PRAÇA DO COMÉRCIO
SAME DAY

A TTO OPENED THE EMERGENCY TRUNK retrieving a pair of rubber-cased binoculars. After studying the square, he lowered them. Liza asked:

‘What’s going on? What do you see?’

Unable to find the right words, he crossed the boat, handing the binoculars to Liza. Looking for herself, she saw that the crowds who’d previously been enjoying the evening were now packed tight inside the restaurants and bars, with those who couldn’t find space inside clustered as close to the windows as possible, their attention fixed on television screens as if the country were gripped by a penalty shoot-out in the World Cup final. Many people were holding hands, some children were on their parents’ shoulders, others pressed against their legs. Half-eaten dinners were abandoned on the outside terrace tables. Instead of swooping on the remains, chapims were flying in peculiar geometric formations, zigzagging like bluebottle flies trapped inside on a hot summer’s day.

Nearing the dock, they passed abandoned tourist boats which hadn’t been tied up and were now adrift, bobbing like ghost ships.

‘Why would they leave their boats like this?’

‘I’ve no idea. I’ve never seen it done before.’

They both checked their phones. Neither were working; the screens were blank as though the batteries were dead. Atto secured his boat to the moorings, offering his hand to Liza, not because she needed help but as a pact – they’d face this predicament as a team. Understanding the proposition, she accepted his hand. They climbed up to the jetty walking nervously through the eerily empty square, like explorers setting foot on the beach of a newfound land, waiting to see what kind of people would greet them, friend or foe.

As they reached the centre of the square, with the city as hushed as a scolded child, the evening sky turned blindingly bright, as if the sun and the moon had swapped positions. Liza closed her eyes and covered her face as an exploratory light seemed to pass through her skin. She could feel it inside her body, hungry for every molecular detail. Was she floating right now? It felt that way, but she couldn’t be sure, her body was tingling, her teeth were chattering and then it was gone – the vibrations stopped, the light disappeared and the sky was dark again. Slowly she lowered her arms, opened her eyes. Her feet were firmly on the ground and, adjusting to the darkness, she peered up. She saw stars multiplying like bacteria in a petri dish. These weren’t stars, she thought, they were too bright, too big, and they were arranging themselves in formations – they were ships, ships in the night sky. A staggeringly beautiful alien armada had arrived, the moment many had pondered but few had ever thought would happen. With no previous fascination in space, her interests grounded in the world around her, Liza was surprised how quickly her mind accepted this new reality. A scientist to her core, she updated her understanding of the universe – they were not alone in the cosmos and, more importantly, they’d been found.

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Back in the city, across the red-tiled rooftops and church spires, the first sound to break the awestruck silence was the wail of an older woman like the call to prayer. As if answering the call, military jets flew low across the city, crude and cumbersome compared to the elegance of the star ships far above them. After the roar of jet engines came the sound of sirens, so many overlapping sounds that it was clear the city would never be silent again.

Liza turned to Atto, a man she barely knew, whose hand she was holding and sharing this moment with. He was still staring up at the star ships, watching them enter the atmosphere, and she could tell that more than fear, he felt a sense of wonder, utterly absorbed in the magnificence of the invasion taking place in their sky.

‘Atto?’

He looked at her like a man waking from a deep sleep, trying to figure out the world around him. The dumbstruck population stirred into action, some people moving with haste as though they knew exactly what to do in the case of an alien occupation, while others remained stupefied, gazing up at the extraordinary night sky. In awe of the armada above her, one woman stepped into the streets, struck down by a speeding police car that didn’t bother to stop. Those nearby rushed to her side and Liza’s instinct as a medical student was to join them, to try to help. Atto squeezed her hand.

‘No ambulance is coming. There’s no hospital treatment. That time is over.’

Many people seemed to want to flee but had no idea where to flee to – out of the city or underground, should they wait on boats huddled in the middle of the river, away from the buildings, or move to higher ground? Without direction or guidance, they had no sense of their place in this world or this world’s place in the universe.

Anything was possible now. Pulling his own thoughts together, Atto asked her:

‘Where’s your family?’

‘At the hotel.’

‘What hotel?’

‘The Ritz.’

He nodded and they contemplated the chasm between them, but none of these things mattered anymore.

‘Let’s find them.’

‘You have your own family to find.’

‘I can find mine afterwards. Come on, before the city becomes impassable.’

‘Before we move, can I ask, to be sure – what do you see in the sky?’

Atto glanced up.

‘I see ships. Alien ships.’

‘So this is it?’

‘Yes, this is it. Let’s go.’

Still holding hands, they hurried out of the square, passing a homeless man looting cigarettes from a kiosk, petty opportunism so out of step with the scale of their predicament it seemed almost comical to Liza. They passed the Starbucks coffee shop which Atto had mentioned earlier, decorated with banners for elaborate cream-covered coffee concoctions, the team of staff gathered outside wearing their aprons as though they expected their corporate employer to rescue them. Nearby, an immaculately dressed older gentleman with a silk cravat and an antique cane was trying to solicit answers, under the impression that he was the only one who hadn’t been let in on the secret of what was going on. Liza caught sight of a man standing on the rooftop of a municipal building, as if

to get a better view of the alien ships, only to watch him deliberately step off the edge and fall to his death, deciding that this was not a world he wanted to be part of anymore. Having remained calm up until this point, she suddenly felt overwhelmed – not afraid, simply incapable of movement or action.

‘I need to stop.’

Atto stopped and she hunched over, staring at the ground, unable to cope with the multitude of extraordinary occurrences happening all around, wondering if she was going to be sick. Feeling his arm across her back, she told herself to breathe, and the sensation of being overwhelmed passed, her body resetting to this new level of uncertainty and anxiety. She stood up straight.

‘Okay?’

She nodded, watching over his shoulder as two cars smashed into each other.

At Avenida da Liberdade, one of the most prestigious shopping streets in the city, lined with global luxury brands such as Dior and Chanel, they were blocked by a crowd many hundreds deep, growing larger by the minute. Forced to shout over the noise, Atto asked those on the fringes what was going on:

‘O que está acontecendo?’

They told him that there were two police officers trapped in the middle being asked variations of the same question:

‘What is happening?’

Liza understood the impulse to seek confirmation; she’d done it herself, but this was something different. People were grasping for the comfort of denial, talking about it being a hoax, a conspiracy. As representatives of the State, the police officers were expected to have answers. Atto shook his head.

‘They’re not going to know anything.’

‘How can you be sure?’

‘Our government would never have allowed the world to continue as normal if they’d known an invasion was coming – they would never have allowed tourists to fly, supermarkets to sell food.’

‘We shouldn’t stay here.’

With each passing minute the crowd’s mood was spiralling out of control. The first fights were breaking out, scuffles and punches, violence spreading like an airborne virus.

Unable to pass through the crowd, Liza and Atto turned into a side street next to a Louis Vuitton store where ten-thousand-dollar handbags were artfully arranged like raindrops. Somewhere in the city there was an explosion, the first they’d heard, the sounds of war, the shockwave shattering windows and setting off car alarms. Atto and Liza ducked down behind a car, waiting to see if it would be followed by a second or third, wondering if it was manmade or alien. When no more explosions followed, Atto looked at her.

‘Let’s run.’