

BLOOD HUNTERS

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BLOOD HUNTERS

The creatures moved in darkness.

They moved as they had done for millions of years, unseen and relentless, searching for signs of change.

Far above, in a world of sunlight and shadow, glaciers slid from mountains and melted into silver lakes. Forests grew, died and were replenished.

Such changes were barely detectable. They were of no more consequence than the flicker of starlight from a distant sun.

But this was something new.

The creatures gathered now, sensing strange tremors in the waters above. Their knowledge was instinctive; imprinted in every cell.

They are coming, it said.

Seek them out.

Seek them out . . .

1

‘Hey, McDonald,’ Crebbin called across the classroom, holding up his fist. ‘I’ve got a present for you. Special delivery.’

Joe McDonald watched the shaven-headed Crebbin roll up his sleeves and knew the world was going to hurt him again, just the way it always did. But as he swallowed and stared at the floor the new boy, Giles Barclay, stepped forward and said, ‘He didn’t mean to do it. It was an accident, that’s all.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Joe heard the anger in Crebbin’s voice and was relieved to find that it was no longer directed at him.

‘Well, maybe if you don’t shut your mouth you’ll have an accident too.’

Giles shrugged. ‘Maybe I will,’ he said. ‘Let’s find out, shall we?’ He walked across to the open window and sat on the ledge with his legs dangling into space.

‘Meet you by the bike sheds.’

‘You’re crazy,’ said Crebbin, suddenly nervous. ‘You’ll kill yourself.’

Joe peered down at the roof of the bike sheds. They were two floors up and it had to be a drop of at least five metres.

‘Oh, I don’t think so,’ said Giles. ‘But if I do, you can have my trainers.’

He winked at Joe.

Then he waved and jumped off the window ledge.

The problem had been caused, half an hour earlier, by a wasp.

They were in the science lab and Joe had been warning Giles about Crebbin.

‘You want to be careful,’ he told him. ‘Not being funny or anything, but with your posh accent, you stand out a mile.’

But Giles had just smiled and said, ‘I like standing out a mile. It’s what I do.’

The wasp had begun buzzing around Joe’s head and with a flick of the wrist, he’d sent it zinging across the desk where it cracked against Crebbin’s forehead and ricocheted off into the window.

‘Pang!’ said Giles. ‘Back of the net. Thank you and goodnight.’

But Crebbin had squeezed his knuckles and

stared at Joe angrily. 'I'll get you for that,' he hissed.

Wiping sweat from his forehead, Joe had watched Preston, the biology teacher, write 'threats to biodiversity' on the board.

'His armpits for one,' Giles whispered, staring at the wet patches on the teacher's shirt. 'Toxic waste.'

'So, let's see who's done their homework,' Preston said. 'Who can tell me what is the biggest threat to the variety of life on our planet?'

On any other day, Joe would have stayed quiet. He knew it was better that way, staying on the fringes, not drawing attention to himself. But suddenly, sitting next to Giles, he had felt light-headed and reckless.

I like standing out a mile. It's what I do.

He put his hand up.

'Mr McDonald?'

'The biggest threat to the variety of life,' he said, 'is the human exploitation of the environment.'

'Alright,' said Preston, surprised by this. 'Good. And why is that?'

'We use huge amounts of natural resources and create vast amounts of waste. By 2050 there will be half as many of us again. So the size of the human population will cause irreparable damage to the environment.'

Preston was impressed. Shocked, even.

‘What about growth-limiting factors?’ he asked, trying to figure out whether this was just a fluke. ‘What part do they play?’

Joe had seen Crebbin squeezing his knuckles. But he’d also seen Giles’s smile growing wider by the second.

‘In every eco-system,’ he went on, remembering what his father had told him, ‘all plants and animals have growth-limiting factors. Things which stop their numbers from becoming too big. If we don’t limit our own growth, perhaps the earth will find a way of doing it for us.’

Afterwards, Giles had grinned and said, ‘Very impressive, Professor. Where did you learn all that stuff?’

Joe had reddened. ‘My dad teaches biology at the university. He talks about that kind of thing a lot.’

Now, shrieking with excitement, everyone clattered down the stairwell towards the bike sheds. By the time Joe got there, Crebbin was already squaring up to Giles, who was back on his feet and seemingly unhurt. He had landed feet first on the thin wooden roof of the sheds, crashing through it in a splinter of plywood.

‘OK, new boy,’ said Crebbin, beckoning Giles towards him with the tips of his fingers. ‘Come and get it.’

Giles put down a piece of wood that he had been trying to fit back into the shed roof. Then he held up his hands and stepped backwards.

‘Are you sure you want to do this?’ he asked.

‘Yeah,’ said Crebbin. ‘I’m sure.’

He stepped forward and swung a punch at Giles’s head, but Giles quickly ducked beneath it and replied with a right hand that was so fast and hard it left Crebbin sitting on the ground, trying to stem the flow of blood from a bleeding nose.

A gasp of surprise went up from the crowd of onlookers.

Giles stepped back, waiting to see if Crebbin would get up again. But the punch had been a hard one, and Crebbin stayed put. Joe noticed that Giles appeared to be more concerned than angry, as though Crebbin were a small child who had fallen over. After a few moments he held out his hand and pulled Crebbin to his feet. Then he bent down and picked up a piece of broken plywood.

‘I don’t suppose,’ he said, ‘you’d give me a hand with this?’

As Joe watched Giles and Crebbin push the wood back into the broken roof he realised that – once again – life had taken an unexpected turn.

The world, it seemed, was full of surprises.

2

Three thousand miles away in the middle of the Mexican jungle, Professor William Sims was about to get a few surprises of his own. As he watched the project team lower the unmanned submarine DepthX (DEep Phreatic THERmal eXplorer) into the water, he took out his camera phone and captured an image of the strange pumpkin-shaped object that dangled precariously in front of him.

‘What do you think of her then, Professor? She’s quite something, ain’t she?’

Sims turned to look at the short, middle-aged man standing next to him and smiled. It was Dave Moreton, a well-respected professor of geology from the University of Texas. Enthusiasm sparkled in his eyes, and it was catching.

‘Yes,’ he agreed, his smile growing wider. ‘She really is. Quite something.’

They stood together in the fierce heat and

watched the sub being lowered into El Zacatón, the world's deepest unexplored natural sinkhole.

As the waters closed over the top of the orange capsule and its outline faded away into the depths of the underwater cave, William Sims looked up through the circle of trees and thought how incredible life could be if you made the right choices.

Unfortunately for him, he was only hours away from making the wrong one.

'Come on in, William. We're just starting to get the first pictures.'

As he ducked inside the tent, Sims saw that the rest of the team was already gathered around the green glow of a computer screen. There were eleven of them: a couple from NASA, three from the Robotics Institute, three from Stone Aerospace and two professors from the University of Texas.

The smell of warm canvas combined with the heat and humidity to make Sims feel slightly queasy, but his excitement outweighed any feelings of discomfort.

He joined the others and saw that the blue water on the screen was becoming darker and murkier as the sub descended.

Two hours later the novelty of staring at small particles floating around underwater was starting to

wear off when Jim Richler, the leader of the team from Stone Aerospace, made an announcement.

‘OK, everyone, this is it, this is touchdown. We’re currently at a depth of one thousand, two hundred and twenty-seven feet and we’re about to reach the floor of the sinkhole. Gentlemen, we are now officially in unexplored territory. We have reached the bottom of the deepest known sinkhole on earth.’

There was a spontaneous burst of applause as everyone realised what had just been achieved.

‘Incredible,’ said Professor Moreton, smiling happily. ‘Good work, guys!’

But then, as quickly as it had appeared, the smile vanished from his face. Sims turned back to look at the screen and felt the hairs on his neck prickle. Dark shapes swam towards them out of the blackness, wriggling and twisting in the glare of the submarine’s spotlights.

‘Hey,’ whispered Moreton. ‘What the hell are those things?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Richler, his voice unusually quiet. ‘I have no idea.’

For a few moments the only sound was the whir of the computer’s cooling fan. Then, as the lights on the sub went out one by one and the screen was plunged into darkness, Richler swore and turned to the Aerospace guys who were already frantically

tapping on their keyboards.

‘Bring her up,’ he told them, and Sims could hear the urgency in his voice. ‘Bring her up now!’

When the sub surfaced just over an hour later, the sun was already sinking behind the trees and the light was fading fast. Sims watched the mobile crane winch it into the air and swing it toward the shore, water sluicing down the sides and pattering across the leaden surface of the sinkhole.

Moreton began to walk over, keen to get a first look, but Richler stopped him.

‘Hang on, Professor,’ he called. ‘Wait until she’s down.’

Moreton checked himself and smiled, embarrassed at his own enthusiasm.

‘Hey, Harry!’ called Richler, signalling to the crane driver as he lowered the sub onto the bank. ‘Switch on the lights, will ya?’

The driver flipped a switch in his cab, activating a pair of headlamps on the front of the crane. Immediately the area around the sub was bathed in light.

Sims saw Moreton look at Richler, like a school-boy checking to see if he was allowed to go and play.

Richler nodded and began walking towards the sub. ‘OK,’ he said. ‘Let’s take a look.’

* * *

The results were both disappointing and puzzling.

Disappointing, because there was no sign of the strange objects they had seen over a thousand feet beneath the surface.

Puzzling, because there was no damage to either the lights or the cameras.

'I don't get it,' said Richler, running his hands over the smooth metal skin of the sub. 'One minute they're covering the thing, the next minute they've completely disappeared. What're you thinking, John?'

The NASA guy stared at the sub for a moment and then switched his gaze to Richler. 'I'm thinking,' he said, 'that it sure beats the hell out of me.'

'I don't know about you guys,' said Richler, 'but it's dark and I need a drink. What do you say we head back to the lodge and check this thing over first thing in the morning?'

There were general murmurs of agreement, but as Sims bent down to pick up his bag he saw something move at the base of the sub. He turned to see if anyone else had noticed, but they were already halfway towards the vehicles, looking forward to a drink in the cool of the lodge. Kneeling down on the warm earth, he watched in wonder as a green, jelly-like substance oozed from the tiny gap between

earth and metal, wriggling its way across the surface of the sub towards him.

He was about to shout for the others to come back and see his discovery when something stopped him. Perhaps it was the worry, somewhere at the back of his mind, that the others might take it away from him. Perhaps it was the thought that, finally, his chance had come to make his mark on the world. But whatever the reason, William Sims took a spatula and a small plastic specimen jar from his pocket, unscrewed the lid and flicked the squirming object into it. For a few moments he watched, fascinated, as the strange creature flowed across the bottom and then up the sides, as if searching for a way out.

‘Hey, William!’ called the voice of Professor Moreton in the darkness. ‘Are you staying all night?’

Sims stood up in the gathering darkness and looked out across the black waters of El Zacatón. He would leave early tomorrow, he decided; make his excuses and fly back to the UK first thing in the morning.

‘I’ll be right with you,’ he called.

Then, slipping the jar carefully into his pocket, he walked back towards the others.

3

The sun burned fiercely in a blue sky, white-hot and relentless. Streets surrendered to the blaze of heat and houses flung open their doors and windows, gasping for air.

Joe was still thinking about the way Giles had leapt out of that window and saved him from Crebbin.

Whoever would have thought of that as a solution?

His dad opened the refrigerator and pulled out a can of Coke, so cold that beads of moisture ran down the sides and dripped onto the kitchen floor.

‘Like one?’

Joe held up a hand like a catcher on shortstop and the can thudded into his palm. He rolled it against his forehead, cold metal caressing his skin.

‘Sorry I was late home last night. Things are busy at the university at the moment. You know how it is.’

Joe nodded. It was two years since his mother had died, and things were always busy at the university now.

‘Any plans for today?’

Joe opened his Coke and took a sip.

‘I might go over and see Giles later.’

‘Who’s Giles?’

‘He’s a new boy, just moved in. Got a treehouse and everything.’

Joe’s dad closed his briefcase and looked at his watch; he was already thinking about going to work.

‘A treehouse, eh? Well, listen, I’ve got a few things to sort out, but I’ll be back around six.’

‘But it’s Saturday. How come you’re going in today?’

Joe’s dad smiled awkwardly. ‘I had a bit of a disagreement with Bill yesterday.’

‘What about?’

‘Oh, it was nothing really. Storm in a teacup. But I want to try and smooth things over if I can. Make things better.’

He was quiet for a moment and Joe saw that he was staring at the fridge door, at the tattered old photograph of Joe and his mum running towards the waves with surfboards under their arms. But then he caught sight of Joe’s reflection in the window and

turned away.

‘Well, I guess I should get going,’ he said.

Joe nodded.

‘I guess so,’ he said.

At the end of the street, a blue Ford made a left turn, driving along the row of terraced houses until it reached number 26. The driver shifted into neutral, drifting the car into the kerb and turning off the engine. The hiss of air-conditioning dissolved into silence.

The men got out, squinting in the bright sunshine, the tarmac hot and sticky beneath their feet.

They moved to the pavement, checking the address once more before opening the gate.

Joe heard the doorbell, walked down the hallway and opened the front door.

There were two men, one mid-thirties, the other older.

The older one asked, ‘Does Martin McDonald live here?’

But before Joe could answer, his dad arrived and Joe stepped back to let him pass.

‘That’s me. How can I help you?’

The older man opened his wallet and showed him a badge. Then he took a piece of paper from his

pocket and held it in the space between them.

‘Martin McDonald,’ he said, ‘I am arresting you on suspicion of the murder of William Sims.’

4

The body of William Sims lay untidily where it had fallen, like a bundle of clothes thrown carelessly to the floor. One hand stretched out beneath the worktops, reaching towards the pen that was gathering dust next to a forgotten paperclip. A dark pool of blood stained the front of his white shirt.

‘Take some over here when you’re done with that.’ Detective Sergeant Harris was crouching on the floor, peering at something.

‘What is it?’

‘See for yourself.’

The photographer squeezed off a few more shots, then crouched next to Harris and stared at the broken glass that lay scattered beneath the worktop. There was a puddle of water, and at the edge of the puddle nearest to Sims’s body the water was tinged with crimson.

‘Fish tank?’ suggested the photographer, standing

up and pressing the camera to his eye once more.

‘Maybe,’ said Harris. ‘But where are the fish?’

The photographer held the shutter for three clicks before lowering the camera again. One of the neon tube lights was flickering and the blinds were still drawn. A half-drunk cup of coffee stood on the worktop next to a pad of paper.

‘Have you seen this?’ he asked, looking at the pad.

Harris stood up, stretched, put his hands in the small of his back.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I’ve seen it.’

The photographer zoomed in on the words.

*Rapid growth rate. High mobility.
Intelligent.*

‘What’s it mean?’

‘I have no idea,’ said Harris, stepping back from the puddle and flapping his shirt to create a breeze. It was 30 degrees and there was no air-conditioning. ‘But the uniform boys have pulled in a colleague of his – one Martin McDonald. Maybe he can enlighten us.’

The photographer moved carefully around the room the way he had been trained, anxious not to step on anything that might affect the crime scene.

‘Come and look at this,’ said Harris, pointing at

the floor.

Together they stared at the trail of water, so thin it was barely visible. Then they followed it across the room until they reached the small washroom, where the trail led all the way to the base of the toilet. A faint line of moisture glistened across the porcelain and on the wooden seat there were three specks of blood.

‘What is that?’ asked Harris, crouching down as the photographer pressed the shutter. ‘What the *hell* is that?’