

Wake Up With the Kimellians

Part 3

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Part Three

Leaving the city was both easy and hard at the same time. The easy part was picking a south bound direction. The alien cities were all square grids, and all he had to do was look up at the sun in order to get his bearings. But there were no street signs, only dark grey number codes which were painted in the streets at the intersections.

The soot-covered intersections.

Nicole tried to explain how the grid address system worked, but it went over Roger's head. She offered him an extra jacket, advising him to tie it around his waist and use it every few blocks as a "street duster" to clear away the soot.

Roger kept up the effort at first, but while the change in numbers were sequential, it didn't mean much to him. The numbers couldn't tell him where he was, nor how close he was to the city limits.

He gave up on dusting and walked with as brisk a pace as he could manage. But fatigue was already pulling at him when he found the first food center, and he decided he could go inside to grab a meal instead of taking from his stock.

The center was empty, which frustrated him. Roger wasn't sure why at first, but as he walked around, he realized how he felt like a doctor watching their patients for signs of improvement. But no one showed signs of recovering yet, and he wasn't sure they could before their time was up.

Roger gathered a can of milk, and another of spaghetti rings with meatballs, and he took them to the checkout lines at the front. He should have just passed through, but he paused to look at a laser barcode scanner beside the computer.

There was no price for food. The aliens just checked the cans out to know what to restock for their slaves. Roger went over the facts to convince himself to just leave and stop worrying. But the act of leaving with the food unchecked still felt like shoplifting to him, and for nearly a minute he looked at the scanner and thought about checking the items out.

He started to laugh over his indecision, because it was funny. He was a thirty-six –no wait, a forty-one year old– man standing in an empty store at the end of the world, contemplating whether he should steal food which was free anyway.

Free for all the members of the club, he thought, and laughed harder. *But I didn't bring my shopping card with me.*

He was almost out the door when he thought about a can opener and realized the one Nicole gave him had probably drifted to the bottom of his bag. The other utensils were slipped in the back pockets of the bag, putting them within easy reach for his “brunch,” but the can opener kept pulling away the pocket mouth to spill the opener and the other utensils onto the floor in Nicole’s kitchen. It was tossed in with the cloth rolled rows of food, which gave him both extra changes of clothing as well as a form of padding from the cans.

Walking back through the air conditioned store seemed like a better idea when he stood in the late morning sun and thought about taking off the heavy pack to pull everything out. Then would come the process of carefully repacking and rebalancing his load. So no, walking through the center to look for a new can opener was not a bad idea, in theory.

In theory.

He went back inside and promptly got lost for an hour. He located the utensils aisle only after much random searching. Like the missing street signs outside, the ubiquitous aisle signs listing the items were gone, replaced with numbers on the floor. Apparently, everyone was meant to look down all the time.

Roger laughed, finding himself possessed of a gallows' humor. "Honey, do we need any 5235s this week or not?" he asked in a loud voice.

Lowering his voice, he ran through variations of the same joke over and over. "Oh look, 5339 is on sale this week," or "I didn't know 5342 was in season."

Finally, he found can openers and he took one and started to leave. He stopped at the checkout counters again, turning to look not at the scanner, but at the frail young woman who sat at the farthest checkout counter to his right. Roger was somewhere closer to the middle of the stalls, but he didn't bother counting rows to be sure.

She watched him with wide blue eyes, her right arm folded up to rub her left upper arm. Her wavy blonde hair was disheveled, as though she had just woken up.

Roger wanted to say "Hello," but instead, he held up the cans and the opener. "Should I check these out or just leave?" "What?"

Roger tried to walk around the checkout stand to move closer, and the woman almost bolted from her chair. But he froze, and then so did she. He raised his voice and repeated his question exactly the same, and exactly the same, she asked, "What?"

Roger sighed. "Well look, the aliens left, so there's no need to keep a list, unless we thought we'd need to stock up next week."

“Yeah,” the woman said, her voice almost too faint to hear.

“Besides, if I’m making you nervous, maybe I should just leave and you can go back to whatever it is you do around here.”

“I’m the custodian.” The woman raised her voice as she waved an invitation for him to come to her checkout counter. “My quarters are back in the office. I heard you talking to yourself.”

“No, I was talking to my friend Harvey,” Roger said, then sighed when the woman looked around quickly. “Sorry, that was a bad joke.” He nodded to himself, realizing how crazy he seemed to her, and then he took a few sideways shuffling steps toward the exits. “I’m making you nervous, so I’ll just—”

“No, wait.” Again she waved an invitation for him to come over. “I’ll check you out. Do you have your membership card?”

She was understandably shocked when he fell to the floor laughing.

Her name was Zelda, and she was seventeen. Her mother had been a police officer, and her father was eaten in front of her for trying to resist capture. It was all the history the thin slip of a woman would give, but much more was being told by the haunted look in her eyes. Before the invasion, she could have still been called a girl. Indeed, even the children Roger saw the day before still had faint glimmers of childhood in their eyes. But there was no gleam in Zelda’s blue eyes. At seventeen, she was already a tired woman who simply wanted to rest.

Roger offered to take her along with him, and she refused. He knew she would, but he still felt obligated to make the offer. In the same way, he felt obligated to stay a while longer, and no amount of urgency to get down the street could push him toward the exits.

He opened the cans on the checkout counter, smiling when Zelda gasped. “The aliens are gone now,” he said. “You don’t have to follow every rule now. In fact, no one says you have to work here.”

“But I like it here. I’m allowed to talk to people.”

Roger’s ears perked, and he raised one eyebrow in a high arch, trying to make Zelda smile. “Oh really?”

Zelda nodded, but she seemed more ashamed than proud by her admission. She blushed and dipped her head to avoid his gaze. “But then all I ever got to say was ‘Do you have your membership card?’”

“That’s it?”

“No, I also got to ask, ‘How many sacks will you need?’” She looked away while he started eating, and remained silent for several minutes before asking, “Where did you come from, anyway? You seem like...like a different kind of alien.”

Roger swallowed a mouthful of food. “What makes me seem so different?”

Zelda shrugged and dropped her head, but she raised it again to study his face from the side once he’d returned to eating.

When he set aside the empty can and reached for the milk, she said, “I think it’s your eyes. There’s a kind of light in them, maybe. You look like you know something important, something that I should know and I’ve just forgotten it somehow.”

Roger smiled at her. “Don’t worry, it’ll come back to you eventually. All you have to do is realize you’re free, and that light will start to glow in your eyes too. I wish I could be here to see it, because I’ll bet you look gorgeous when you smile.”

It was a line. Roger knew it, and Zelda did too. But after years of dealing with women, Roger knew nothing could bring out a smile in a woman so fast as a genuine compliment about her looks.

Zelda was no exception to the rule, though at first her tanned face was hard to see with her head bowed in embarrassment. She lifted her face to reveal crimson cheeks, and her soft shy smile slowly spread when she saw him nod his approval.

Roger laughed quietly. “Aw, what a shame.”

“What?” Zelda asked, though she was still beaming over the compliment.

“I haven’t left yet, and I’m already missing your smile.”

In the back of his mind, Sandra laughed at him. *Look at you being an old scoundrel again.* Just to annoy his imaginary wife, he reached up to brush a lock of Zelda’s hair away from her face. Then he knew he was being a scoundrel, and he knew the effect his fingers grazing the side of Zelda’s cheek would have. She shivered, then made a soft laugh before leaning away.

In Roger’s thoughts, Sandra snickered. *Lover, back away from the jail bait slowly.*

In his very distant past, he had been a true scoundrel, a phase which lasted right up until he’d met Sandra in his mid twenties. It wasn’t that he meant to play the field so much, but he was a visually stimulated person who started relationships based on looks alone. And while he could

get into the pants of almost any woman he met, getting into their hearts proved somewhat more difficult. So each partner would drift way within weeks, leaving him free to search again. Sandra changed that, and she made him feel guilty for flirting with other women.

But he felt no guilt flirting with Zelda, or with being just a little bit of a scoundrel. After all, it was nothing more than a few compliments and a light touch. And no matter how much the young woman liked him, he doubted she would come with him on his trip. Even if she did, he was definitely too old to still play that kind of scoundrel.

Zelda did follow him to the exit, but she offered him only a hug and a soft “Goodbye” before she went back inside.

The edge of the city limits was a disconcerting sight for the perfect alignment of the buildings remaining. Roger turned his head east and west, and the blackened buildings spanned out in either direction for miles.

But the change was also obvious for the tracts of burnt land outside the city limits. The buildings taking off blasted away much of the plants and top soil around the city, leaving behind only the alien constructed roads which sectioned off vast tracts of exposed clay. The surface glittered brightly under the late afternoon sun, and when he walked closer to the side of the road, he saw how the thick layer of sand and clay had fused to a glassy polish under the heat of the jet flames, then shattered into shards after cooling overnight.

But the road was unblemished, save for soot and debris.

Debris, Roger thought and turned to stare at the wall of soil and rocks piled over the road. No matter which way he left the city, Roger would have to climb and descend the piles, and he suspected the cities would all be surrounded by similar walls, though obviously the compositions would change with the local geologies.

Before he could get past those barriers, he just had to climb what appeared to be a pile of broken glass.

“Good grief, Sandra,” he exclaimed as he started walking again. “I said for better or for worse, but this is ridiculous.”

While he approached the wall, his mind wandered back to the store, back to a thought he’d had before talking to Zelda. Everywhere he looked, addresses which required looking up were instead painted on the ground. No one was meant to look up. No one was meant to look at each other, or talk to each other. They were allowed to eat well, and so long as they were quiet, they got to live.

The feeling of guilt welled up when he considered his anger at the others for still just standing around. He had never seen an alien, and didn’t have the right frame of reference to understand what the people were frightened by. But fear had bowed their heads, and servitude without hope of freedom had dulled the lights in their eyes. And if they were still slow to react, what could he expect? They were whipped.

“Shoulda, coulda, woulda,” he said and nodded to himself. “Typical redneck answer there, Roger.” He started to drawl, falling back into an accent he hadn’t used since his teens. “Yep, iffen I was there, those ali-uns wouln’t’a done that kinda shit to me, no sir.” He sighed. “And then I’d be dead. God, you did me a favor by putting me in a coma.”

He stopped at the base of the wall and tilted his head back. The whimper escaping his lips was not masculine, nor was it made in sarcastic spite.

The wall was covered in broken shards of fused soil.

“Now, if you can only put me back in a coma, I’d really appreciate it. Either that, or can you give me some gloves?”

He raised his hands, but no gloves fell from the heavens. Roger nodded and sighed before he dropped his hands to slap his legs.

The action sent a plume of dust up from the dirty jacket still tied to his waist. Roger looked down at the jacket and said, “Ask and ye shall receive.”

Sandra sighed in his head. *Idiot. You’ll look for a miracle in anything, won’t you?*

“Maybe you’re right,” Roger said. He chortled, which caused him to inhale stray particles of soot and started him coughing. “Ask me again if I find the real you.”

At the top of the wall, Roger’s gallows’ humor failed him utterly. Beyond the blast wall of debris was a graveyard of twisted buses. All the public transport vehicles caught in the blast were blackened, and their impacts with the ground had enough velocity and force to bend the clear window ports as well as twist the sidewalls and frames. Despite the damage, he could hear some of the bus engines were absurdly still running. But while the vehicles were intact, the occupants inside were either shattered or splattered.

Roger descended the wall more easily, finding less of the glazed rock and more larger chunks of debris to use as

steps. Once he was back on the road, he had to look up, and there was no way for him to make light of the situation then. For hundreds of yards, the buses were tossed around the landscape, and it seemed most of them had been heavily occupied.

They were just coming home from the factories, Roger thought, then shuddered. *Dear God, no wonder everyone is in shock. They've all lost people in the shift change.*

The contents of his stomach were heaved up in front of the first bus. He raised his head to check the damage, and then doubled over to puke.

The front windshield was wrinkled all the way around to the sides of the bus, and trapped inside the ripple near the exit was the upper body of a person. There was too much damage to the face and torso to be sure of the gender. The top of the head was missing, and the person's scrambled brains were pressed up against the rolled metal window. Blood leaked down around the gaping wound, and out of the person's mouth, and then the whole stain had dried to a sickening black color.

I could have been in the bus. Roger fell to his knees and crossed his arms to hug his aching stomach. The ache spread to his chest, and he tensed his arms, clutching his hands against his sides. He looked like he was trying to hold himself together, and subconsciously, it was his intended goal. But it was an act made in vain when he finally completed his thought: *Sandra and Roy could have been riding home too.*

Roger sank back on his haunches, bowing his head as his shoulders started to rise and fall in spastic hitching. He was silent, but once he'd expended his air, he drew in a deep breath and wailed.

His pained moans and sobs filled the air until he was sounding hoarse and feeling raw in his throat. Even then he could not control himself. Roger blubbered like a struck child, reeling at the number of people who died.

Even in shock, his mind stubbornly refused to stop backing up to consider the real scope of the tragedy. It was not just the deaths in one city, in one state, or in one nation. The aliens ran factories in shifts, and across the world, the night shift in Japan was likely coming home when the buildings took off.

The aliens message echoed in his thoughts. *Humans, we regret to inform you that your planet will be invaded by the Kimellians in seven days. We will be taking our leave of your planet now, and offer our deepest regrets at your eminent demises...*

If the Kimellians were so brutal that the alien slaveholders fled in fear of them, a bleak part of Roger's mind conceded that perhaps the people in the buses had been done a favor.

Roger saw more wildlife wandering loose along the sides of the road than he ever had at the city zoo. He felt like he was in a strange dream world, and almost every time he glanced along the sides of the road, he found himself staring at a deer, or a rabbit, or a horse. He was starting to wonder if the aliens only spared the cute animals when a skunk crossed the road twenty feet ahead of him. He froze and held his breath. *Don't spray, just carry your bad self along.*

The skunk stopped in the middle of the road and looked at Roger. It sniffed at the air, and then kept walking. *Oh,*

thank you, you little stinker; he thought glibly.

Why are you thanking it? Sandra asked. *A black cat just crossed your path.*

Roger frowned, wondering how it was that even his imaginary wife could carry the same sarcastic mean streak. He really would have preferred a fantasy where she wasn't such a smartass.

"Now look, I'm making the effort to come and see you. Can you at least be happy about that?" Silence. Roger nodded his head. "All right then."

Of course you can win an argument against me, Sandra mumbled. *I'm the imaginary version.*

Roger let it go.

He walked for as long as he could manage, but before the sun set, he was already too exhausted to do anything but wander off the road and sink down into the grass on his stomach. Then resting his face on his crossed forearms, he closed his eyes. He had just long enough to wonder if he could sleep in such an uncomfortable way, and then his mind snapped off.

Roger pulled his car into his designated parking space before he shut off the engine, and then the headlights. He glanced around for signs of the apartment complex security guard and dug in his console for the half smoked joint left behind by Kisha, a very lovely lady he was hoping to get closer to. But while she shared her pot and allowed for a few stolen kisses, Kisha was leaving him to do a very slow burn before she would relent and let him come up to her apartment.

He puffed the joint and conceded that he didn't mind waiting, and he was just about to crack the window to exhale when a bulky man walked past the driver side door. Thinking the man was the complex security guard, Roger rocked sideways away from the window and stabbed the joint into the ashtray.

But even seeing it wasn't the guard didn't calm Roger down, because the man had an angry posture, as well as a stomp in his stride that said he had something bad on his mind.

Roger got out of his car at the same time the man walked into the front door of the apartment building, and by the time Roger was inside the corridor, the man was halfway up the stairs. Roger didn't follow him.

Thump! The man slammed himself shoulder first into a door. "Sandra, bitch! I know you're in there! Your little slut friends can't protect you!" Another thump sounded, and the door cracked. A woman screamed, and then there was the sound of someone being slapped hard. The sound rang through the corridor and down the stairs, causing Roger's body to jolt in response.

Somebody should do something, he thought.

But he froze. He listened to a short struggle ensue, and then the man was at the top of the stairs again, clutching a woman by a handful of her straight black hair. Roger couldn't see her face, but he guessed she was Sandra.

The man locked gazes with Roger, and his dark brown face contorted into a mocking scowl. "What the fuck are you staring at? You want some of this?"

Roger made a half smirk and shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, sure."

“What?” The man stared at him, some of the rage leaving his dark eyes to be replaced by confusion. “Are you crazy or something?”

“Hey, bring it on, macho man. You can even take a flying leap if you think it’ll help.” Roger paused, then shook his head while his expression became dead serious. “But if you come down those steps with that woman, I’m going to put you down and break the hand you’re holding her with.”

The man tossed Sandra aside and started down the steps. “You want a piece of me?”

“No, I can handle all of you at once,” Roger said.

The man was still four steps above Roger when he snapped out a sloppy kick. Roger leaned away and let momentum do the rest, watching the hulking man lose his balance and slam down onto the steps.

Before he could recover, Roger knelt and grabbed the man’s collar, lifting his head and shoulders up before he shoved down to slam the man’s head against a step. He waited and heard a growl, slamming the man against the step again. Pause. A low moan rose briefly, then faded before the man went limp.

Behind him, Roger heard someone run in through the front door, and he turned around to look at the security guard, already raising his hands above his head. “Check on the girl first,” he said.

The guard opened his mouth to shout at Roger, then looked up the steps and started running, rising up three at a time. “Ma’am are you all right?”

“Yes, but could you check on Rachel?” Sandra pointed back down the hallway. “Harry knocked her out before he started dragging me out here.”

Roger heard her start crying, and his temper flared when he thought of his neighbor Rachel Watts. She was a short and skinny college student who wouldn't stand a chance against a mauler like Harry.

With the security guard and Sandra both looking down at him, he still couldn't stop himself from stomping on Harry's hand.

Harry rose up to howl in pain, and Roger lifted a leg to crack Harry's chin with his kneecap. Harry's teeth clapped over his tongue, and blood sprouted from his lips.

The guard was back down the steps to shove Roger away two seconds later. "You didn't have to do that! He's bitten off his tongue."

"Nah, he's just bleeding," Roger said as he backed up. He scowled at Harry, who rolled around on the steps in agony. "Rachel is my neighbor. If he laid a hand on her, yeah, I had to do that."

He looked up the stairs as Sandra stood up. He saw the swell of her stomach then, and his eyes flicked up to hers, filling with a questioning look. *Is it his?*

Sandra's only answer was to look away, her bruised face filling with shame.

Roger's anger melted away then, and he thought, *I'd give anything to make that woman smile.*

Roger snapped awake, his senses becoming fully alert when he heard a growl. He laid still on his side, listening to the sound getting closer. Rolling over slowly to flatten himself against the ground first, he raised himself up on his arms, arching his back and tilting his head. Then he saw

the wolf in the pasture, and fear clenched his throat until he saw the animal wasn't looking at him. It was closing in on a lone calf standing in the pasture.

Roger glanced around, but there were no other cattle, and he hadn't remembered hearing or seeing any when he stopped to rest for the night. His brow furrowed while he watched the wolf slink closer to the calf. It took off at a full run in case the calf tried to get away, then leapt for the kill.

But the calf didn't flee. Instead a green bolt of light lanced out of its mouth, and the wolf was vaporized.

Five seconds later, the calf vanished.

Roger learned two things at the same time. First, that the aliens were only saving the cute animals; and second, that he needed to stay on the roads. In fact, he decided he was too far from the road by being in the ditch.

He removed his pack and dropped it directly beside the road. Laying down, he tried to use the pack as a pillow. But sleep wouldn't come again, and it had nothing to do with the can stuck under the base of his neck.

He was dumbstruck by the idea of the aliens preferring only the docile animals. They wanted only the animals who were easiest to control, and the more violent humans were also sifted out in such a way. But out in the wilds past the cities, the security systems were still actively patrolling for wolves and other predators like coyotes, cougars, and bobcats.

But then, some humans were likely to go check on a lone calf as well, so the system could also work for humans. Roger got up and put on his pack. He walked closer to the fence enclosing the pasture and stood almost as close as the wolf had to the fence. But there was no calf. Instead, something humanoid shaped stepped out from behind a tree, and called, "Hello! Can you come over here, please?"

The shadow outline could not be seen clearly enough for a single detail stand out, but then the figure walked out from under the tree, looking like an elderly man with a bad case of scoliosis.

He wasn't hunching over before, Roger thought and started back for the road. *Don't follow me, please, don't follow me.*

The old man stayed in the pasture, but for a short time, he tried to follow alongside Roger. His affected limp was forcing him to fall behind, and he finally stopped walking altogether. The old man had left Roger's peripheral sight for three seconds when he felt compelled to look back and check.

The old man was gone.

