

Wake Up With the Kimellians

Part 4

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Part Four

The city looked only slightly different from the last because there was a drizzling rain falling from low hanging clouds, and the soot began to rinse from the buildings, rendering the tops a dark grey while the bases were still black.

Roger spent most of the night walking after his encounter with the active security system, and the sun was just rising when he came to the edges of the debris wall.

He'd spent most of the night turning dreary thoughts over in his head. There was an obvious reason to want only docile animals, as it meant no one would be able to fight back or pose a threat. But he had a gut hunch suggesting there was another reason.

The victims were treated well once they surrendered. They were fed, given order, and promised peace in exchange for compliance. Roger stopped walking when the thought froze. It was important that he didn't abandon the line of logic until it was complete. *So at this point, they're like victims of Stockholm Syndrome. They'll believe whatever their captors tell them.*

Roger's frown drew tighter across his lips, and his brow pinched more deeply into a disturbed expression. Because where his thoughts headed muddied the issue of his future.

It was possible there were Kimellians coming to kill everyone, but it was also possible they weren't coming, and the whole story was...what?

Certainly it could not be a hoax, or any kind of test. Any alien race, no matter how advanced, still had to consider expenses when running their operations, and burning off so much fuel just for the sake of a sick practical joke didn't make sense.

He considered the idea for a few minutes longer before he thought, *I guess I'll find out in four days.*

The act of ticking a day off of his remaining time stirred him back into motion, and he was well within the city limits when he finally chose to enter one of the buildings to escape the strengthening rain.

Just as with the remains of Wichita, the people of the city he found himself in were trapped inside by indecision and shock. He didn't bother trying to make contact. Instead he went down into the sublevels of the building to replace his dirty clothes with fresh uniforms from the vendors. He took extra jackets to further pad his bag, and to provide him with bedding for when he next had to rest outside the safety of the cities.

Then he sat down in the lower level corridor and unpacked his bag, tossing away the pungent and damp clothes while he tried to decide which can to open for his late breakfast.

He found himself longing for company while he ate. The light in the corridor created by the tube lights above him was dim, making the white walls seem bluish grey instead. It was a drab and cheerless place to take respite, but the sight of the stained alien city was no better. He was still on Earth, but with every familiar reference taken from him, he might as well have been in another solar system.

He longed for the sound of Nicole's quiet voice, yearned for another few minutes of talking to Zelda to see her smile again. He wanted to coach another round of kick the can for the kids, or at least find out what the Leftist Liberals did with their newfound power.

But all such opportunities laid on the road behind him, and the road ahead beckoned him to push on. The faces of the people he'd met blurred into each other, making every person an indistinct impression in his mind rather than a clear memory. He had an odd notion that he'd been talking to ghosts, people who were already dead.

They already are dead. They're just empty shells waiting for the Kimellians to crush them. Roger felt a dull ache in his chest which killed his appetite and left him feeling desperate to move again.

He stopped at the sliding doors in the lobby, his mouth twisting in anxiety while he stared at the blanket of rain which assaulted the city outside. The water was coming down so heavily, he almost believed he could drown in it.

Roger went back to the elevator doors and asked himself, *Up, or down?*

There were other buttons for all ten of the sublevels, but when he tapped anything below the second sublevel, nothing happened. The doors wouldn't even close. Special access was needed somehow, perhaps with a supervisor's card.

Roger chose to return to the second floor.

An idea came to him on the ride down, and when he got off, he looped his arm around the door to send the elevator car back to the ground floor. He waited a few seconds, and then tried to pry open the doors. The gap he made was almost enough to slip his head through, but not wide enough for his chest. The effort of trying to force the doors apart winded Roger, and he had to lean over to rest his hands on his knees while he panted.

This would have been easy for me before, he thought.

His eyes followed the billowing sleeves of his uniform jacket. Before the coma, his arms would have strained the seams. But he was a tall, pale wisp of his former self, and even something as trivial as prying open the elevator doors became insurmountable.

Anger flashed across his face, and he shook his head, refusing to give up. He bore the people in the building above him no ill thoughts, but he had no desire to join them in their apathetic conditions of shock.

He pried open the doors again and shoved his knee between the black plastic bumpers to wedge his leg into the gap. Then setting both hands on one sliding panel, he twisted his leg the other way, straining his whole body. The doors whined in protest, then clacked before they slid back too quickly.

Roger teetered on the edge, staring down into a black pit. His eyes flew to the piston centered in the elevator shaft, and he made a desperate attempt to jump out instead of falling forward.

He had little momentum, and he fell half a floor before his arms could close around the piston. The outside was coated in a slick clear fluid, preventing him from slowing down though he hugged the pole with every ounce of strength he had left. By the time he could wrap his legs around the pole, he had already plunged five floors into total darkness.

The lubricant soaked his clothing and coated his skin. It irritated his arms and chest, and the sickeningly sweet scent of the fluid was cloying. It wasn't a petroleum based grease, but he had no clue what it could be.

His speed of descent decreased, but he could not stop, nor did he have any way to leap for a door. Which was assuming he could see to know when to stop in front of a door. He clung to the pole though his limbs ached, and fatigue was again sapping his strength.

At last his feet settled on the piston base, and he tried to step down tentatively to the floor. His slick arms couldn't hold him to the pole, and the foot which explored for purchase found only empty space. Roger fought with both gravity and the sleeves of his stained jacket, still pawing at the piston while he dropped back and away from his only safe reference point.

The fall was short, perhaps only a yard at most. But Roger's breath was knocked from his chest, and his head bounced off the hard pavement, dulling his senses.

Roger put his hand into the small of Sandra's back, gently urging her forward while he covered her eyes with his other hand. She would be sure to peek otherwise. Crossing the front yard, he lifted his hand and leaned closer to whisper, "Okay, now you can open them."

Sandra did, then made a soft gasp when she saw the house. "Oh, Roger."

"I know it's not big, but it's got two bedrooms. For now, I'll be taking the kid's room until he's ready to use it." Roger grinned impishly. "But after he's born, I'll either have to take the couch or move in with you."

Sandra laughed, turning to watch him with an awed expression. "I don't deserve you."

Roger waved away the comment. He'd heard it before and she still couldn't convince him. "Nah, don't go putting me up on a pedestal, Sandra. I don't care if you were bad before I met you. I was bad before I met you." He smirked and made a quiet laugh. "I'm still bad now."

"Why is that?" Sandra asked coyly.

"Because even if I'm giving you all of this with no strings attached, a greedy part of me hopes you'll still feel obligated to hang around after you're back on your feet again."

"I can't believe you'd do all this for me."

Roger took her hand and squeezed it. It was the only contact he would allow himself, though he longed to close his arms around Sandra and pull her into a long kiss. He pushed the urge away and said, "I do it all gladly, just to see your smile."

Roger had a hard time telling when he'd truly woken up. His dream about Sandra merged into other memories while he laid in the darkness. Roy's birth was followed by the many long months he and Sandra traded nightly shifts keeping the baby fed and changed.

But when he came to the memory of his first night of real intimate contact with Sandra, he knew he was awake by then, and he forced away the mental movie. He couldn't afford to get lost in thoughts of the past.

He didn't feel pain until he tried to move, and then his back ached dreadfully. A spiked hammer was punching holes in the back of his head, and his mind conjured an image of a gruesome head wound.

His hair was sticky, and there was a heavy knot where he'd made contact with the floor. But the dull throb was only a goose egg swelling up, and not his brains leaking out of his skull.

He dropped his hand and tried to wipe the blood on his pants before remembering the lubricant coating his clothes.

How long had he been out? He had no clue, and the first fingers of panic poked at him through the dark. Crawling on his hands and knees, he tried not to let his breathing become a pant while he searched for the wall.

His fingertip brushed the smooth surface of the wall, and he was struck by the notion that it wasn't concrete. Instead, his mind was conjuring images of red brick though he found no seams or pits. The bottom of the shaft was not laid in bricks, but the surface was brick-like in texture.

The service ladder was on the same side as the elevator doors, and once he'd found the rungs set into the wall, he stood frowning to himself.

This is all wrong, a voice in his mind insisted.

He couldn't make himself ascend, and his hands clenched the metal rung until his knuckles ached. The ladder just didn't make sense, because mucus like aliens wouldn't use a ladder, would they? He didn't really know, but it didn't seem likely.

He started to climb, patting the wall every few steps to feel for a door. He knew he would need to ascend much higher to get out of the building, but for now, he wanted only to be out of the shaft, and out of the blind darkness. The lack of light made the air seem heavier and harder to breathe, and even though he wasn't straining himself, Roger still panted. His heart raced without a steady beat, and his stomach clenched, threatening to empty out into the space below him.

He found the door and let go of a breathy laugh, a sound which exploded up the elevator shaft and made his strained ears ring in the following silence.

He tried to reach out for the middle of the doors and couldn't.

Growing desperate, he patted the wall, working his way up one rung at a time. The process was tedious, and he was sweating, making his hands even more slick.

The lever set in the wall had a small metal knob at the top to pull, but his hand slipped away on his first few tries. He could not wipe his hands down, and he couldn't move on and try again. If he couldn't open the doors into the first floor, the higher floors only offered him a better chance of a fatal fall.

Like the doors above, the lever fought until the midway point of its arc, and when it clunked, the doors slid open to reveal dim blue light pouring out of the corridor beyond. No matter how dim it was, the corridor had light, and Roger was frantic to be away from the dark claws of panic in the elevators shaft.

He swung around the open door and dropped onto the floor, resting his burning cheek against the cool tile while he tried to get his breathing back under control.

Roger stripped out of the slick stained clothes, then used one uniform to wipe away as much of the lubricant as he could before he got dressed again. But tossing aside the dirty clothes left him with a jumble of cans digging into his sore back, and he almost left it as well before reminding himself that the food might be needed before he got back to the surface levels.

His skin still felt slick and dirty. Most every muscle in his body was either knotted tightly or loose from fatigue, and the physical drain was pulling him down into a hazy mental state.

Roger dropped his head to look at the floor. He took note of the number in front of the elevator, and then he set off down the long main corridor to explore. Every twenty feet, he found doors to his left and right, a pair of numbers painted on the floor which told him nothing about the use of the rooms. He didn't bother trying the doors at first, instead walking to the shadow-deep end of the corridor.

He had taken only a few tentative steps into the shadows when a feeling of vertigo struck, and he held out a hand to feel for the wall and reorient himself. His palm brushed the wall, and a clack sounded before light flooded the area and blinded Roger.

When he could open his eyes, his brain overloaded on visual stimulus, numbing the rest of his senses and draining his remaining strength. Roger slid to the floor, his eyes locked no more than five paces ahead of him, where the floor dropped away into the massive room beyond. A bridge of pipes less than two feet wide gave passage across what looked like a deep chasm onto a platform. The platform was surrounded by computer screen panels, creating a shell above the platform and around the sides.

Roger was struck again by the thought that the whole thing was wrong. The systems were made accessible for humans, but the humans weren't allowed in the lower levels of the buildings. There shouldn't have been a narrow

walkway to the platform. A gelatinous alien would want something different. A mucus-like alien wouldn't have use for a ladder, or elevator door handles, or even doors, to his mind. The building was obviously not a human construction, but it was a work made custom for their needs.

Why?

Roger turned his head to glance down the now lit corridor, caught in a debate on whether to turn back and explore the other rooms or press ahead the last few paces. The idea came to him that the room at the end of the corridor was a trap, like the calf for the wolf, or the hunched over old man for him. But the idea seemed illogical. Why make a building with human accessible systems, just to kill the humans who used them?

He chose to press on, but he didn't stand. He didn't trust his balance, so he chose to crawl across the bridge. The decision proved to be both beneficial and frightening at the same time.

It was frightening because looking down through the pipes into the bottom of the spherical room caused his vision to swim, and he worried incessantly about rolling over the side. The mazes of pipes and cables sank down to surround a wide hole below the platform, and he stared into the hole, thinking how he had almost walked off the edge. If he had, he might have found out where the bottom of the pit was.

But the decision to crawl was also beneficial, because the sensation of vertigo gripped him again as soon as he was on the bridge completely. Instead of toppling over the side, he fell forward onto his stomach.

He almost uttered the question, *What's wrong with me?* But then he already knew. He was weak, and he'd gotten old in his years long sleep.

No, not a sleep, Roger corrected himself. *When I sleep, I dream, and I didn't dream inside my coma. Or, at least I don't remember if I did.*

He let the thought occupy his mind while he tried to recover from the spinning in his head and the nausea jabbing his gut. Whether the platform did anything or not, he would have to return to the corridor and sleep before he could do anything else. His body could carry him no further no matter how strong his willpower was, and the weakness of his body drained his mental reserves as well.

Roger crawled to the platform and rose up on his knees, looking at the screen directly in front of him. There were no buttons or consoles he could see. Nothing was visually obvious which could be pushed, flicked, or turned. Roger frowned and raised his hand to touch the screen, and then all of the screens lit instantly, filled with a bright white color.

Roger looked up. Three screens above his head, a world map appeared. The regions of the map were covered by a square grid, and one of the squares was blinking. The section of land was shaded with tones all in red before shifting back to normal colors, and then back to red again. Because the location of the blinking box was over the US, he guessed the screen was indicating, *You are here*.

Standing up, Roger pushed the blinking square, and the map swelled from the single screen to fill the entire range of screens in front of him. He was not surprised to see each city on the grid was labeled below by a numerical value, but the near uniform coverage of cities in the northern United States was a shocking contrast to the few cities shown in the south.

There were no country or state boundaries to provide him with a reference point, so he hovered his finger over the gulf of Mexico and brought his hand up to touch the city which seemed closest to where Houston should have been.

The map swelled again, and the screens showed him a grid of the city like a satellite view looking directly down on the buildings.

Roger reached out for a grid point, then froze. Would he see inside the building, or be moved to it somehow?

Roger snorted at the silliness of the thought, but then he considered it more seriously. There were no trucks on the road outside the cities. There were no trains, or methods of heavy transport. So if the aliens did not move materials by vehicle, how then were items distributed to the vendors? Or to the food centers?

The idea of instant transportation excited Roger, and yet it also scared him terribly. How did the process work? Would it hurt? He put those thoughts aside. He could be wrong in his guess, and the computer was just a surveillance system, or perhaps even more simple, it was just a map. But if it was a transportation device, it could bring him closer to finding Sandra and Roy.

He stepped back and looked at the grid. Using the east border as a reference point, he chose a building as close to where his home should have been. He didn't expect to find his house, but he hoped to find familiar faces at least.

At first, nothing happened except the grid square blinked at him. He waited, and still nothing happened. He stared at the blinking grid section and frowned thoughtfully.

Maybe it's a confirmation, like the window on the home computer asking if I'm sure about closing a document. Roger nodded at the thought and pressed the section again.

The map vanished as all the screens turned green, a dreadfully bright color which reminded Roger of the beam the calf used to vaporize the wolf.

He tried to step back, but his body was held in place. He wouldn't have had the strength to fight the beam at full health, and he was sick, aching, and sore. Capturing and holding him was all too easy for the alien device.

The glow from the screens extended, filling the platform with green light. It was all he could see before his sense of sight was cut off.

Roger had the sense of moving rapidly, though it was a sensation of movement without visual or aural confirmations. He felt no drag from wind, nor did he hear the air rushing past him. He did not see himself being thrown from location to location, but when he could see green light again, he knew he was in another building hundreds of miles from his original location.

His limbs were released, and he dropped to the floor, panting while he tried to calm himself down. Once he was breathing slower, the weight of fatigue pulled his eyelids down. He couldn't resist the crushing need for rest, and sleep claimed him only seconds after his arrival.

Roger took a step back when the man in front of him at the checkout counter pulled out a revolver. His right hand dropped to grab Roy's shoulder and move his son back behind himself. Roger's gaze rose up and left to the other side of the counter, where the clerk was raising her hands, the color draining from her face while she stared into the barrel of the robber's snub nosed pistol.

He didn't think out his plan. He just lashed his hand out and around the robber, setting the wedge of skin between his thumb and hand down to block the revolver's hammer. Closing his fingers around the gun and the robber's hand, Roger raised his other hand and took hold of the man's collar to yank him back. At the same time, he kicked the point of his toe into the back of the robber's knee, slamming the kneecap into the counter with an explosive crack. The man bellowed as he dropped down and tried to pull forward. Roger stopped pulling back, then used the robber's awkward momentum to slam his face on the counter.

The hammer dropped, biting into his skin, but the gun didn't go off.

Roger peeled the gun away from the man's limp fingers and let him drop to the floor. He made a pained hiss while he extricated his punctured hand from the gun and set it on the counter. Before he could suggest the cashier should call the police, she was already reaching for the phone.

While it seemed like a cliché to say so, when the police officer arrived to ask him what happened, Roger could only say, "I don't know. It all happened so fast."

Roy watched Roger with a beaming expression the entire time the police questioned him. The pride in the ten year old boy's eyes was obvious, and long after the robbery was over, he trembled with tense excitement.

After filing reports and having his hand bandaged by a paramedic, Roger went to the counter, paid for the soda Roy still clutched, and swapped it for a cold bottle before they continued on their planned route to the park to fly a kite.

Roy followed Roger to a picnic table, where they assembled a small box kite together. Roy patted Roger's arm and passed him the roll of twine before he asked, "Where did you learn to do that?"

Roger shrugged off the question and unraveled enough twine to tie it to an anchor flap on the side of the white plastic box. "Before I met your mom, I used to work as a bouncer."

"So that's where you learned how to fight, in a bar?" Roy seemed positively enchanted with the idea.

Roger shook his head, then held out his hand for the other roll of twine. "No, I learned to brawl in the projects, and I spent some time working as an amateur fighter."

"You mean like a street fighter," Roy said.

"Yeah, something like that." Roger grabbed Roy's hand and frowned at him. "Look, your mom...she gets mad about

things like that. She's got her reasons, but maybe it would be a good idea if we don't mention this to her."

"Why not?" Roy asked, his face drawing into an incredulous expression. "That was the coolest thing I've ever seen. How can mom be mad about that?"

"Just guessing, I'd say she'll be mad because I put you at risk. To her, I should have just stood there and let the robber leave." Roger laughed quietly. "In fact, I can hear her in my head now, and I know that's exactly what she'll say. So, we'll just make up something about this hole in my hand, and we'll act like it never happened."

Roy pouted, then reluctantly agreed, "All right, it's a secret, but I won't forget this."

Roger smiled and patted his head. "Okay, I can live with that."

They got up to carry the kite across the park, and once they had it riding the winds upward at a steady rise, Roy's smile returned. He tapped Roger's forearm again, his smile widening into a grin. "I want to be a hero like you when I grow up."