

THE SCAR GATHERER

Extract from *The Ring from the Ruins*

This extract is from chapter 10. Joe has just run home with Lucy after the air raid siren goes off:

They flung themselves through her front door and kicked it shut. Joe felt a surge of relief that they'd got here. Somehow, it felt so much safer to be indoors rather than outside in the road. He knew that was absurd, given what a bomb would do if it fell on the house.

The hallway was in total darkness except for a wavy line of light along the floor in front of the kitchen door. The siren had stopped, but Joe's ears were still ringing.

"Is that you?" Lucy's mother cried out from somewhere ahead of them. "Thank God! Hurry up! Peter and I are under here already. I think we've got everything."

A flickering light lit up the hall. Ellen had drawn back a curtain beneath the stairs and was holding up a candle on a saucer. "In you come, quick now." She held the curtain aside. Joe wondered whether this was the entrance to a cellar, but beyond the curtain was just the triangular space under the staircase. It was even smaller than it might have been because of what looked like lengths of telegraph poles nailed along one wall and up the sloping ceiling.

Peter was already sitting on a wedge of blanket on the floor with his legs crossed and his arms clasped round them. He looked as if he'd had to be folded up just to get in. Joe shed his coat on the hall floor and squeezed past an upturned crate that was serving as a makeshift table. He sat down beside Peter as Lucy threw down her satchel and climbed in next to her mother.

Ellen drew the curtain across again and put the candle on the crate. "I'm so glad you're here!" She pulled Lucy close and kissed the top of her head. "I was afraid you wouldn't get back in time. They've never come before about seven, have they, except for the odd daylight raids, I suppose."

"They wanted to make sure we didn't get our tea!" Peter said. "Keep the enemy hungry and they'll give up fighting!"

Ellen grinned. "I'll go out once the first wave has gone past, and see what I can salvage." She looked at Joe. "This is your first air raid, I suppose?"

Joe nodded, glad that he didn't have to pretend otherwise.

"When the sirens go, we have to douse any fires that are lit and turn off the gas, which means no lights or cooker. I was in the middle of getting tea, but whether any of it will be edible I don't know! It's just as well everyone else is at work," she added. "What would we have done if this had happened on Tuesday?"

"It would have been worse than sardines!" Lucy laughed. "We'd never have got Amos Harper under here with us, as well as Uncle Tom and Aunt Jane!"

The hum had swelled to a drone. It sounded like a swarm of bees on the other side of the curtain now. Joe looked at the piece of material, puzzled. What use was that if a bomb fell? Maybe it was just to cover this space during the day. With the reinforced wall and



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ceiling, it did look a bit like a building site under here.

He heard a far off crump, and then another, a little closer.

"Let's have the playing cards then, Peter," Ellen said brightly.

Peter drew a box from his pocket and tipped the pack into his hand. "We'll play rummy, shall we?"

Another explosion. A fourth, a fifth. In between, ear-splitting whistles, like demented fireworks. They weren't fireworks, though. Fireworks weren't intended to kill people.

Joe watched Peter shuffle the cards and deal them out on the crate. How could anyone concentrate on a game with all that going on out there?

The engines of the planes were loud now. They must be right above them. Joe found he was holding his breath. To distract himself, he tried to think through the dangers he'd faced in Lucy's worlds. This must be the biggest, the most indiscriminate, much worse than Tobias with his knives or gun.

Except that wasn't right – the Great Fire of London had been wholly indiscriminate, just as dangerous, maybe even worse. That had turned out alright in the end, for Lucy's family at least. Maybe this would be fine too.

The explosions were coming one after another now, some quite distant, others terrifyingly near. All the time, the whistling went on, drowned out only by the roar as a building or road was torn apart. Joe picked up his cards and looked at Lucy and Ellen. Their faces were taut with waiting. There was no logic in assuming they were all going to be fine. There was no logic in any of it. Whether or not they survived depended on the precise second at which a man up in the sky flicked a switch. A moment's difference could wipe them all out.

But surely that couldn't happen, Joe thought. Any bomb that got Lucy would get him too. He couldn't be flung back into his own time dead! He closed his eyes. It was better not to think about it.

He didn't know how long the bombardment went on. It might only have been minutes. It felt like hours. At last, the explosions seemed to be getting further away, as though the bombers had chosen a new target.

Then came a deafening blast. Lucy shrank down in her corner, her eyes screwed shut. The whole house shook. Joe heard the smash of falling china in the parlour. He threw his arms over his head and waited for upstairs to crash down on them.

There was only a trickle of dust.

"Was that this street, do you think?" Lucy asked after almost a minute.

"Olivia Street, I reckon," Peter answered, "poor buggers."

"Peter! Language!" Ellen cried. Then she burst out laughing. "I can't believe I just said that!" she exclaimed. "Here we are, a few hundred feet from destruction, and I'm telling you off for swearing! I'm sure the Lord would forgive you even if that was the very last thing you said!"

Peter grinned. "Thank Him, it hasn't been!"

Lucy began to giggle. Joe started to laugh too, though he hardly knew why. More than anything, it felt good just to be alive!

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