

Aftermath

Dr Wahid Khaled looked at the Fitband on his wrist and gulped his coffee down, scalding the roof of his mouth. Putting his mug and plate on the Kitch-o-mat, he grabbed his Compupad and medical bag and headed for the front door. As he approached, it opened inwards and said in a cheery voice, "Good morning, Sir. It's eight thirty a.m. on Wednesday, 8th November. The weather is still unseasonably warm, so you will not need a jacket. No rain is expected."

Hot, dry air assaulted Wahid the moment he set foot outside. He stood for a moment and looked at the beautifully manicured bright green lawn with its multi-coloured border of patio roses. His garden never failed to lift his spirits, but this morning he felt an unwelcome touch of guilt that he quickly banished from his mind.

The offside door of a new metallic red and black eco-SUV slid quietly open, and he gratefully eased himself into the cool interior. Basmi, the personalised in-car operating system, closed the door behind him before ejecting the overnight charging cable, which promptly rolled itself into its receptacle in the house wall.

"Where can I take you this morning, sir?" she asked as the main colour screen of the driver's command console came alive. A faint chirruping sound signalled that the vehicle's climate control system was now drawing power from the onboard batteries, not the house.

"The Seacrest Community Centre, please", said Wahid, as the car began to move out of his drive. It turned onto the communal road to the automatic gates securing the residential complex of up-market homes.

Once outside the perimeter and on public roads, the SUV drove itself through the parched landscape, now permanently scarred by the drought that had blighted the UK for the past ten years.

Flash floods had carved deep canyons into the land as the water raced downhill to the encroaching sea. A decades-long energy crisis had caused all forms of firewood to be coveted, and now, some years after the last tree had been felled, the area resembled the stony wilderness of Wahid's native Syria.

The Community Centre stood on the outskirts of the Old Town, now, for the most part, abandoned to the rising sea levels. Those buildings that had survived the increasingly frequent Atlantic storms looked grimy and were covered in monochromatic graffiti. An uninspired and uninspiring grey cube of concrete had once housed offices, a bank and three or four retail premises. But the UK's economic collapse, coupled with the unstoppable increase in internet shopping and the ravages of the human-induced climate crisis, had rendered such facilities superfluous in run-down seaside towns like Seacrest.

The entire building housed the foodbank, welfare centre, and health centre. A local charity, 'Helping Hand', staffed it with volunteers like Wahid, who was on his way to provide his weekly day of free medical care to the growing number of unemployed and low-paid who could not afford food, water, energy or the annual NHS subscription.