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STRANGERS AND ALIENS

2010-2011 Grade Level 8

Word Count: 1,995

## *STRANGERS AND ALIENS*

*Boswell, June 14, 11:02 p.m.:*

Thirteen lights, hovering. Flying high like strangely luminescent birds in a triangle of meticulous formation. For a second, they hung there, suspended in the black canopy of the eastern sky. Then they were gone, just as suddenly and inexplicably as they had appeared.

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Skye was barking. Again. What was it this time? Eleven-year-old Mart Ian McKinley slipped out of his bunk, slithered his feet into his squeaky galoshes, and headed out into the night.

*Bark! Bark, BARK!*

“Hush, Skye!” Mart hissed.

Vaguely outlined in the murky darkness, the animal stood firm, ears alert, staring towards the eastern horizon.

*BARK!*

Mart turned towards the object of the dog’s emphatic baying. The dog was forgotten. For there, like nothing Mart had ever seen before, shone thirteen lights, soaring far above his head like some undiscovered constellation, driving all other thoughts out of his mind but one: ALIENS.

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Alda Conrad was in a sleepy wakefulness. Dozing here, waking there, and rocking slowly in the creaky, decrepit chair out in front of her creaky, decrepit house, staring at the stars.

The old woman sighed. It was getting late. And yet, she still lingered, soaking in the coolness of the night air, waiting for something—she could not say what.

She woke with a start. A dog was barking somewhere, not too far off.

Then she saw them. All thirteen of them.

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Private Miles Evander keyed his radio. “Nothing to report, Sir.”

Nothing to report. Nothing ever to report. Watching the radar at the military base five miles out from the tiny town of Boswell was about as interesting as doing nothing. Practically in the middle of nowhere, the radar tower never picked up more than a few buzzards circling aimlessly. Nothing to do. Nothing to see. Nothing to report. The sliver-like greenish line rotated mesmerizingly on the black monitor leaving waves of shimmering emerald light in its wake. Nothing...

Wait. What was that? Some kind of aircraft, headed west. The line rotated, shimmering.

The object was gone.

Finally. Something to do. Something to see. Something to report.

Private Evander keyed his mike again.

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*Boswell, June 15, 7:03 a.m.:*

Mart tried desperately to recall the events of last night. Had it all been a dream? What exactly had happened? Skye barking, strange lights—nothing *that* unusual. But here? In the middle of nowhere? And *thirteen* of them?

In Mart’s mind, there could only be one explanation: Aliens.

Mart flipped through the pages of a dusty encyclopedia to an article on ufology. The drawings that littered the page were identical to what he had seen last night: lights, in a triangle.

His mind reeled. Could it indeed have been an alien spaceship? Had they landed? Were they here—in Boswell—at this very moment?

He knew one thing for certain. He was going to find out.

Pulling on some jeans, Mart raced out of his room, down the stairs, through the kitchen and out the back door. Skye was waiting for Mart in the back yard, tail wagging vigorously, tongue lolling out of her mouth to one side. She was ready to run.

“Come on girl,” the boy shouted. “Let’s go find some aliens.”

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There *was* something about those lights. Alda just knew it. But her memory was not quite exactly what it used to be. “No wonder people search for the fountain of youth,” she muttered.

Alda racked her brain, searching for something already lost, something buried deep behind memories of birthdays, weddings, funerals, names and faces of friends now long gone. Flipping through old scrapbooks and sifting through toppling stacks of paper which littered the floor, Alda searched for a clue to her past. Bills, old photos, discarded candy wrappers, newspaper clippings...

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It was a mystery. The strange object Miles had seen on the radar last night had not reappeared. It did not look like any ordinary aircraft he had ever seen. There had to be a reasonable explanation, but what?

Relieved of his watch, Miles drifted back to his sleeping quarters and found himself alone in the low-ceilinged cement-block barrack. A single, bare light bulb dangled from above, shedding a dismal green hue over the empty room. Miles flopped onto his bunk. His eyelids drooped and he slowly drifted off...

His dreams were restless, as if trying to grasp something forgotten, something just out of reach. What was it? It was there, somewhere. If only he could remember...

Suddenly, it came to him. A single idea pulled from the very deepest part of his memory: "This is not your home."

Then it was gone.

Miles woke in a cold sweat, panting. The light bulb flickered overhead.

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Skye ran ahead of Mart, her nose to the ground, sniffing violently. Her snorts stirred up clouds of red dirt as Mart panted to keep up.

"Hey! Wait up, girl! Can't...go...that...fast..." There was a nasty stitch in his side. But he had to press on. They were out to find aliens.

*BARK! BARK! BARK!*

They must be getting closer. Fueled by furious adrenaline, Mart dashed forward. Suddenly, he felt himself staggering, falling. Smothered by his panicked fear, everything went black.

*BARK! BA—yelp!*

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Nothing. She had been searching for hours, and still, Alda was drawing a blank. She slowly sat down on the faded sofa. Her eye roved about the room, searching. Suddenly it focused on a piece of paper, shoved deep into a crack in the floor boards. Bending down slowly, she pried it out. It was a ticket stub, yellowed with age. The ink was faded, and the destination unintelligible. But Alda had finally remembered. She knew what it was:

A one-way ticket to Mars.

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Miles vaulted out of his bunk. It was the top bunk. The cement floor rose up to meet him more violently than he expected. He groaned and stood up, shaking himself. What was wrong with him? An unexplained blot on the radar screen had gone to his head. He had to straighten this out. Miles left the barracks, heading northeast, running towards the old Boswell Crater, to where the object had been headed the night before.

*BARK! BARK!*

A young boy surged out of nowhere, followed closely by a huge dog. The boy flew around the corner. Off the cliff-like side of Boswell Crater. Miles sprinted to the edge and peered over. The boy lay about twenty feet below, still. Mart hesitated to help. He had no clue how he could get down, or if he would be able to haul the boy up when he got there.

The boy's dog, which was howling in distress, obviously had no such fears. She hurled herself over the edge in search of her master. That did it. Miles wouldn't be shown up by a dog. He swung his legs over the side of the cliff and plunged into the blackness below.

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Memories crowded into Alda's brain. Her mind raced back to that day when it had all begun.

It was all over the newspapers:

“OZONE LAYER DISAPPEARING”

“TEMPERATURES RISE AS WORLD POPULATION SOARS OVER 8 BILLION”

“EARTH HAS LESS THAN FIVE YEARS”

Pure panic consumed everyone until ...

The brilliant English scientist, Deverell Dawson, formed a brilliant plan—a plan for saving civilization. Newspapers took up the story, blaring in giant headline type: “DAWSON TO SAVE WORLD.”

Reporters printed articles detailing his plan and lauding his efforts: “Since Mars is similar to Earth in size and axial tilt, it will be one of the best planets on which to set up an alternate human habitation. Dawson's plan will involve sending a select group of human and animal specimens to colonize Mars. Dawson affirms that if the atmosphere of Mars is thickened and the temperature modified, a colony could be set up to carry on the human race. Many will be left behind but Dawson says it is all for the greater good...”

Soon, all was ready. A shuttle took off for Mars. The chosen were deposited there on the bare red surface to fend for themselves. Alone.

Thirteen lights rocketed back into space, back towards Earth, towards home. Young Alda had seen them go.

Time passed. Life went on. And the memory of Earth all but faded away...

Yet now Alda remembered. She knew what those thirteen lights meant:

Home.

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Alda's mind was racing. Enough wasted time. She must act. Rushing outside, Alda got into her corroded van, inserted her key into the ignition and sped off towards the sunset. Sure, her license had expired a decade or so ago, but this was an emergency, and it was time she did something.

Before it was too late.

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Miles jumped to the ground a few seconds after Skye. Mart's limp form had already begun to stir.

"Hey, take it easy, kid." Miles reached down and scooped up the boy. He turned slowly, surveying the outstretched crater, hoping for an easier slope to climb up than the one they had come down. Something glinted not too far off. Miles squinted.

"What—whoa. Kid, you're not gonna believe this."

Mart looked. The shadows cast by the setting sun partially hid the crater floor. As if evolving from the darkness, two black figures came into view. Buried deep in the shadows behind the figures lay an object, colossal in size, triangular in shape. A spaceship. The lights. Mart's heart rate accelerated.

Two beings turned and began moving towards Miles, Mart and Skye. The three were trapped by an unknown enemy. The two closed in. Mart shut his eyes.

*BARK!*

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The sound of a dying engine. A car door slamming.

“STOP!” It was the voice of an old woman.

Mart knew it. He was dead. He had to be. What in the world was happening? He lifted an eyelid. An elderly woman approached hurriedly and inserted herself between Mart and the creatures.

She faced the figures. “Who are you?”

Mart stared as the closest individual reached up and unscrewed its helmet.

“We’re your rescuers.”

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“I’m Captain Terra Stellan. Your planet is in danger. We’ve been watching you for a while.”

Mart shivered. Creepy.

“I’m Deverell Dawson’s granddaughter. This was his colony, his greatest work.”

Huh?

“He colonized Mars, as Earth’s demise seemed immediate. However, Earth is still intact and functioning, but this planet won’t be for much longer. Dawson’s artificial atmosphere is collapsing. Such disintegration will cause a dust storm like never before. All life will be eliminated. We have to leave *now*. Time is running out.”

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The storm was coming. Wind whistled around the rocks that littered the Martian surface, kicking up cloudbanks of dust, promising the destruction to come.

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Mart's mother found her boy after a desperate search. Skye was contentedly lapping at Mart's toes as the boy's arm was being bandaged by a soldier. The worried mother immediately began pelting him with questions and smothering him with sympathy.

“Are you okay? Where have you been? You're sure you're alright? What happened?”

“Oh, Mom...”

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Boswell was leaving. Their days on this planet were drawing to an end. Most of them didn't know exactly why. But one thing they did know: this was not their home.

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A cloud of sand appeared on the horizon. Billowing and curling. Devouring everything in its path like a dragon of old. It was nearing the crater. Alda looked out from the spaceship's porthole. The world she had lived in for most of her life was falling apart before her eyes. But this was not her world.

Terra touched her shoulder.

“Are you ready?”

Alda smiled.

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*Boswell, June 16, 8:32 p.m.:*

Thirteen lights, hovering. Flying high like strangely luminescent birds in a triangle of meticulous formation. For a second, they hung there, suspended in the black canopy of the eastern sky. Then they were gone, just as suddenly and inexplicably as they had appeared.

The Martians were going home.