

Ishmael II : Pandora

Chapter 23 – Happy As We Are

“They hadn’t been hungry for that long, life on Jersey had been good. It was just that a few hungry days with little clean water to drink and you begin to wonder if that’s how life is always going to be from now on.”



There was less in their supermarket trolleys and all of them had at least one wonky wheel. They’d all survived to get to Filey though, them and their squeaky trolleys.

“There, over there.” Yelled Ela. “I can see Fifth West on a signpost. Someone knocked it over.” Moment of truth for Bren Grundy, they were so close to the Filey Campus, that she could almost feel Deb Newman slapping her face, before plunging a dagger into her heart. The road from the roundabout was going in roughly the right direction. They followed it and any doubt was taken away by the next sign, which said they were on the grounds of Fifth West’s Filey Campus. There was even a line about vehicles being banned from area F, wherever that was. Bren stood in front of the sign and froze.

“I just hope they let us in.” Said Doug.

After all that time and thousands of miles, the moment had come and Bren couldn’t get her feet to move. She stared at Matt until he too, stopped walking.

“Are we really going to do this ?” She asked. “I’m happy the way things are.”

“We’ve been trying to tell you Matt.” Said Doug.

“We could find another boat, a new Eleanor.” Said Ela.

“And go where ?” Asked Matt. “We’ve had a lot of good luck, though we’ve all got a few fresh scars. Eventually that luck will wear out, maybe soon. There is nowhere else to go..... It’s not as if I’m going to pretend nothing happened between us Bren.”

“Really ?”

“Yes, really....I’d never pretend we haven’t been lovers. We can hold hands when they open the door, if you like.”

“If they open the door.” Said Doug.

“You’re not helping Doug.” Said Ela.

“Fine, let’s get it done.” Said Bren.

She led the way, across a huge car park cratered by bombing. Eventually a pathway ended at a sign pointing towards a large, solid looking building.

“Administration and reception.....Sounds like where we need to go.” Said Doug.

“I’d have thought we’d have been surrounded by soldiers by now.” Said Matt.

“They probably save those for door-to-door sales people.” Said Bren.

Matt pressed the button on the box on the wall, while yelling into the grill with ‘speak here’ underneath it.

“Hello, I’m Matt Newman.....My wife is expecting me.”

He had to give it three goes before a female voice replied.

“Please wait there, someone will be with you shortly.”

Bren got the impression the doors weren't opened that often. There was quite a bit of noise, most it indicated bolts and locks were being opened. Eventually the very solid looking doors opened outwards to reveal a middle-aged woman with long dark hair.

"Just stay there for now."

There were at least half a dozen soldiers behind her, all wearing Fifth West uniforms. None of them were aiming weapons at them, but it was obvious they weren't going to simply walk inside. The middle-aged woman ran a device over them, aiming it at their faces. She scanned them all, though she spent a lot longer running the scanner over Matt. The huge smile indicated the device had given her good news.

"So, it is you, Matt Newman. You're still a bit of hero here, we even have a Matt Newman Day on the 12th October."

"The day we brought down the alien tower." Said Bren.

"Yes.....Introductions first, I am Francine Lazan, the Base Commander. Some call me the dean of studies, or head of campus. Come in.....All of you, come in. My people will bring your.....Things." Francine was smiling at them all, though she seemed almost obsessed with Matt. An ex special forces soldier who'd said he'd cross the globe to get home, and actually did it. Bren could understand why Francine was giving him the returning hero treatment. The problem was that Matt had crossed the globe to be reunited with his wife.

"We'll find you all rooms, but I'll take you to the faculty lounge for now." Said Francine. "Proper coffee I think, time to dig out my personal reserve supply."

"We have genuine coffee, lots of it." Said Ela. "It's in one of our trolleys."

"What ? Amazing, our scavengers rarely find any these days." Said Francine.

The lounge wasn't that large, though there were comfortable looking chairs and doors with the gender symbols on them that indicated they were bathrooms. Their trolleys arrived pushed by soldiers, who carefully put them in a corner, as though they were something incredibly precious.

"Someone went to fetch your wife Matt; she runs our clinic on Tuesdays."

"Tuesday.....Do you know the date ?" Asked Doug. "We lost track of dates somewhere near Suez."

"Oh, you have had some adventures. Our computer systems are still functioning and I can tell you with some certainty that it is Tuesday 18th September."

"Crap, we've been thinking it was August." Said Bren. "And that today was Sunday."

"Hmm... That means we left Tripoli on a Wednesday." Said Ela.

"Fuck..... We were all wrong." Said Doug.

Francine was giving them the kind of look Bren used to give her slightly dotty uncle, who used to demand fish and chips for Christmas dinner.

"Well.....Erm...." Began Francine.

"I can see the coffee maker.....I'll make coffee, real coffee." Said Ela.

Bren used the bathroom, which was about the same size as the one on the Eleanor. They hadn't been out on the road for long, just long enough for her to get fed up with squatting to pee behind a bush. A proper bathroom was wonderful, there was even hot water. By the time she came out they were all drinking coffee, while Matt talked to a woman with a young child in a carry cot. It wasn't a large room and everyone had gone silent. Ela was beckoning her and by the time she was sat next to her on a sofa, the woman with Matt was crying.

"We heard it all." Whispered Ela. "That's Matt's wife and the child is her son, Ramsay."

"Oh, wow."

"Yep, things look to be.....Complicated."

Bren honestly didn't know what to make of it all, though she thought it was unlikely Deb Newman was going to try and claw her eyes out.

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There were days when Lianne Verga wished she and her father weren't quite so competitive.

"My Ekranoplan is ready to test, but I've yet to receive an invite to the official launching of the Nostromo. Having a few problems?" Asked her father.

It was so unfair, the Russian beast of a plane had been a fully working prototype, it had even been flown from its hangar in St Petersburg. She, on the other hand, had inherited a wreck that even JV had never managed to get working, not fully. It had even collided with the hangar roof during one test run of the engines, by JV and Dimitri Minasyan. Not that she was going to complain about the unfairness of it all. She knew life wasn't fair and besides, it would all sound like excuses.

"Not long now dad." She said. "I'm aiming to leave the atmosphere at the first test launch."

"That is ambitious Lianne. My plane will just fly a few miles out into the Gulf of Finland, before firing a missile and returning."

"Missiles dad, you have missiles?"

"They use a fairly standard launch tube, the same used by their submarines. It was fairly easy to adapt them to fire Fifth West missiles. No nukes of course, but they'll still deal with any aliens who get too close to our base."

Lianne loved her father very much; he'd even turned a blind eye to her still sharing a bed with Nigel. There were times though, when she'd have loved to give him a good hefty kick in the balls. He had missiles, fucking missiles.

"There.....My Ekranoplan is beginning their run." Said JV. "They're going right out to Mayak Seskar island to fire a missile at the island. Then they'll go up to top speed to get back here. I really doubt if the aliens will spot them."

There was room for over a dozen crew on the strange ocean-going aircraft, though only four were going on the test run. Everyone cheered when the huge beast of an aircraft left the jetty and hurtled out to sea. It was noisy and looked bizarre, but it was also awesome to watch.

"It'll be useful to defend our base, but we'll have to leave it behind." Said JV. "You need to launch your Nostromo soon, or we'll be leaving Russia before you get a chance to see if it will take off."

"I hadn't thought of that dad. I sort of assumed someone would come and get us, when they were ready to leave."

"I'm sure the fearless Kitty MacLaren could come and pick us up, but only you and me. We've a lot of people here Lianne, we owe them quite a lot of loyalty."

"Yes, of course I dad. I wasn't suggesting that we'd abandon them."

"The shuttles will be ready soon; we need to decide where to go. I was thinking of the base in Norway, it is the closest. The Ekranoplan can protect us until we reach Sweden. Sadly, it will have to be skuttled before we head across Sweden and into Norway."

"Retracing our steps." She said.

"Yes, they have space enough on their shuttles to take all of us. It means your Nostromo will have to be destroyed after you've tested it."

"I suppose so....Yes, I can see why. I just hadn't given it a huge amount of thought."

"You can't fly it to Norway.....Look, they've fired the missile."

The missile had to be many kilometres away, yet it was visible against the sky. Bright, very bright, its fiery trail shot up into the air, before descending again. Lianne assumed Mayak Seskar island wasn't

populated, her father would have checked. The explosion when it came was huge, the bright flash of light reaching them before the loud boom.

"The hybrid creatures seem to be keeping the aliens occupied." Said JV. "I'll still feel far safer with Ekranoplan to protect us, just in case."

The war seemed to throw up a lot of 'just in cases,' though no one seemed keen on identifying them, or quantifying the risks involved.

"They're going to try to get close to Mach 1 on the way back." Said JV.

"Can we be on her, on the Ekranoplan I mean, when we leave here?" She asked.

"Yes, why not....That's a great idea."

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They hadn't been hungry for that long, life on Jersey had been good. It was just that a few hungry days with little clean water to drink and you begin to wonder if that's how life is always going to be from now on. Or at least Daisy had begun to feel like that. They'd arrived at Filey late at night, about twenty-five or so hours after being picked up. They'd been searched, their weapons taken away. It seemed there were too many militias out there and assorted bandits, for anyone to be accepted at face value.

"Once you're processed, you'll be allocated permanent accommodation." Someone had told them. One large room with mattresses on the floor. Not enough mattresses, not really, though there was just enough after they agreed who was going to buddy up with who for the night. The room and the mattresses were clean at least, and there was a proper shower in a separate bathroom area. To be honest, Daisy found it comforting to all be sleeping in one room together, until they knew more about the people in Filey campus.

"Someone in charge will see you in the morning."

The door wasn't locked, there was no need for it to be, they had nowhere else to go. Their new friends had fed them, at least Daisy hoped they turned out to be friends. A large amount of food and water had been put on a table, far more than they'd need for the night. It was as if food and water weren't precious to them, just something they took for granted. She'd woken up crying once, though she had no recollection why.

"It'll be fine, they're good people." Steve had told her. "You'll see.....Good people."

"I was happy in Jersey Steve. I was happy with how we were."

The morning brought some friendly people with clean clothing and questions, quite a lot of questions. Who wanted to be allocated an apartment with who, which had ended up with her and Steve being told they'd soon be taken to an apartment in section Y, which meant nothing to either of them.

"Very nice apartments, I live in one." A young girl told them.

Slowly it began to happen, especially when a woman brought her own child with her, who instantly got on with Maria. It seemed to happen gradually, but after an hour or so, everyone realised the Filey campus meant them no harm. Better than that, they were going to be helped and looked after.

"My name is Edith. We'll be asking you questions to see where you'll be a good fit. Everyone works here, though most of you are likely to end up in shuttle assembly."

"I don't know how much use I'd be." Said Jada.

"She has trouble walking." Said Tracy.

"Not everyone has to do a physical job." Said Edith. "We have a room of remembrance and quite often the grieving like to talk someone with a little maturity."

"I'm sure I could manage that." Said Jada.

“Work and you eat.....Work and you get a place on a shuttle to mankind’s new home.”

A young man asked Steve about his work experience, which seemed to be a lot of jobs that lasted for five minutes, followed by years as a DJ. Luck was with Steve, it appeared there had been a need for a DJ on their internal entertainment for some time.

“If you’d be interested ?” Asked the young man.

As if he wouldn’t be interested. Steve looks happier than he had for quite some time, right back to when it had just been the two of them living in his cottage in the middle of nowhere. He’d make a good job of being their DJ, he’d probably get a phone-in feature going quite quickly. As for her ? Daisy was worried she’d end up in shuttle assembly, which sounded dreadful, especially as everyone tended to end up there. Or so they’d been told.

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Extra screening had been placed all around the pen where Horace and Metro were kept. Effectively the post grad students had created a faraday cage to prevent just about anything electromagnetic entering or leaving the pen. No one really understood how the mental link between the aliens worked, but Andy Korenberg had suggested the electrical shielding. They hadn’t been bombed yet, or put under siege, so it had probably worked. Pandora Gray had brought her mother into the viewing room to watch the aliens. It was also the perfect place for a private moment that definitely had to be totally private.

“We’ve removed the fence that separated them, though we’re still monitoring them constantly, just in case things turn nasty.” Said Dora.

“Oh, they are ugly looking brutes.” Said Judy. “I’d always wondered what they looked like. We see their robot creatures, but I don’t remember seeing one of them.”

“Very few people have seen them mum. For a long time, it was thought the large greens were the alien creatures behind the invasion. The army called them Ripleys in those days, for fairly obvious reasons. Then they dissected a few bodies and realised they were Bio-Bots.”

“What are you doing with them ?” Asked Trudy, nodding at the glass window.

“Horace is confronting Metro for us, browbeating him from what we’re hearing.”

“You can understand those things ?”

“Oh yes, we know their language quite well now and our AI can turn it into English. Metro is one of the alien elite and Horace is giving him an ultimatum. Agree to allow the survivors of mankind to leave Earth unmolested, or we’ll release our own version of the green death. Our version is toxic to them, but not to us. It’s in their interest to let us go. Far better than having a final battle where millions of their kind might well die.”

“Will you do it if he doesn’t agree ?” Asked Judy.

It was a question she’d been through so often in the Delta Labs, with the members of their research team. Were they willing to commit genocide if it came to it ? There had been some serious arguments, though no one had left the team. In the end it was realised there was only one way the decision could go.

“Yes, our entire team agreed that we would. If it was a question of the end of mankind, or wiping out the aliens, we’d wipe out the aliens. We’ve even worked out a trial run, should Metro need a little convincing. There is one problem though.”

“What’s that ?”

“Gassing large areas of the planet isn’t easy. I hate to say it, but that is probably the only reason a crazy cult hasn’t done it by now. The active ingredients decay and you need billions upon billions of

litres of the gas. The aliens did it slowly, by adding the toxin to their atmosphere generators. Horace admitted they were hoping we wouldn't work out what was going on, until it was too late."

"The bastards." Said Trudy.

"They just needed a new home mum, they just wanted to survive."

"How can you even look at it like that?"

"I'll tell you a secret mum, one you mustn't tell anyone, even Rod."

"I never talk about what you tell me Dora, ever."

"Good.....Andy will make the final decision, but there is a chance the shuttles might arrive at a planet populated with intelligent life. Do we fight them or carry on looking for a new home? Andy isn't even sure we could simply get back on the couches and try again."

"I can see why you'd be concerned, but mankind must come first."

"Which is probably how the aliens feel about their kind mum.....Anyway I have some news that everyone will know soon, but I wanted you to hear it first."

"Oh, good grief Dora.....Are you pregnant?"

"No mum, I've been on the pill since I was fourteen and now synthesise my own small supply for personal use."

"What? You were fourteen?"

"Go easy mum, you can hardly sue Doc McAllister now....Anyway, Ish has decided to remain on Earth when the shuttles leave and I will be staying with him. There is a place for you and Rod, this doesn't affect you."

Her poor mum, told that after losing each other for years, that they were to be parted again. The face looking at her suddenly looked older, as if the life had been drained out of her. Dora rarely felt sorry for her mum, but she felt sorry for her then.

"Is it because of the infection in his hip?" Asked Judy

"Yes, it's his hip mum, the latest prediction has him in a wheelchair when the shuttles leave. All the near miracles we've achieved, yet we can't cure what should have been a simple bacterial infection. We can slow it down, but the infection is still spreading. Ish had said no to surgery.....The AI predicts he has a year left, maybe a little less. He doesn't want to die on a strange world, I can understand that. Ishmael is going to remain on Earth, so I'm staying with him. We'll keep ourselves busy, he's talking about helping a human collaboration with Vicky's people. He's intent of working hard, right to the end."

"You don't have to stay here with him Dora."

"Yes I do mum, Ish is the only man I've ever loved. He is staying here, so I'm staying here. Accept it, I'm not changing my mind."

There was another side to Judy Gray, one the world rarely saw. Her mum had once written a piece on the feral cars of Marrakesh. Instead of being a feel-good piece for a women's magazine, her mum had come down on the side of control by culling the cat population. Judy had been surprised when the piece had been rejected. It wasn't that her mum just didn't read the room, sometimes she lost her moral compass completely.

"It's him again, he's ruined your life since you first met him." Yelled Judy. "The police always on their doorstep and he could never hold down a job. Now he wants you to stay here and die with him. I've been telling you for years, but you never listen. Ishmael is no good, he's a crazy guy.....He doesn't deserve you Dora, not my little girl."

Her mum could go on for hours, listing Ish's failings. Dora had long ceased to argue, though it did all still hurt. Ish used to get confused because he saw things and though the police had brought him

home a few times, he hadn't been arrested. If Ish didn't see things, visions of the future, they might all be dead. No use telling her mum that though, no use at all.

"I need to monitor the aliens to make sure they don't attack one another. I can do that better on my own mum."

"A little painful truth and you want me to go?"

"Yes mum, I do. Go and help Rod on the farm, it is your designated job after all."

"So that's how it is."

"Go mum, please.....Before I find it impossible to forgive you."

Her mum went, though of course she had to get in the last word before closing the door.

"You know I'm right Dora.....You know I'm right, that boy is trouble."

When her mum had gone, Dora put on the headphones to listen to the AI's version of what Horace and Metro were talking about. It sounded quite heated, the accusations of treason from Metro, countered by talk of stupidity from Horace. There was no outward sign of stress or conflict, apart from them both bobbing up and down on their ludicrously tiny feet.

"A minus ten for evolution there." Dora muttered.

She took notes and tried not to cry, though in the end the tears came. Dora had to dab at her eyes with a tissue so that she could watch the aliens argue. It wasn't that she hadn't heard it all from her mother before. She had, often, sometimes in the past her mum had said far worse. It always hurt though, it always hurt so much.

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Matt Newman had been scared that Deb would feel like a stranger, that something special between him and his wife might have died. Instead, he saw the woman he had once loved, tickling the tummy of another man's child. Did he still love her? He suspected he did, though his feelings were confused. He had been sharing a bed with Bren all the way from Australia. Deb had been keen to talk to him privately, to deal with matters in a civilise way, was how she'd put it.

"Who is his father?" He asked. "Sorry, is it alright to ask that?"

"Of course it is, though there can be no fights."

Matt laughed and held his hand up, as though giving an oath.

"I promise not to attack Ramsay's dad.....So who is he?"

"Art..... Art Singer, he's the base science officer. I think Art is short for Arthur, though I couldn't swear to that. Older than me, he'll be forty-seven at his next birthday. You're bound to meet him, unless you'd prefer not to?"

"No, I'd love to meet Art and I promise there'll be no fisticuffs. I haven't exactly been living like a monk since we last met."

"We all need someone Matt.....I'm assuming Bren, I saw the way you look at one another."

"Yes, Bren and I have been together since leaving Australia." He said.

"Do you love her?"

"Oh.....To be truthful, I'm not sure.....We are happy though. Do you love Art?"

"He has become a good father to Ramsay. I know that doesn't answer the question. We're happy too, which is good..... I wish Iris was still alive, she'd have given you hours of gossip about Art and myself."

"Who was Iris?" He asked.

"An old lady, a patient at the hospital I worked at. We sort of adopted one another. Can you stay for a meal? If you can, I'll tell you all about Iris Bouvard."

"I can stay, my crew know I might be gone for a while."

“Your crew ?”

“We had the same boat all the way from Australia. We all loved The Eleanor and I still think of them as my crew.”

“Then I will cook for you and tell you all about Iris, while you tell me about your crew. I take it you still eat anything ?”

“Yes anything. I’ve surprised myself by some of the things I’ve eaten over the last couple of years.”

“I can imagine.....How about a chicken burrito ?”

“Perfect.” He said.

While Deb did wonders in the small kitchen, he looked at the baby in his carry cot. A long way from being a toddler, but not a tiny baby either. Without thinking, he held Ramsay’s tiny hand.

“Sorry.....Is it alright to touch Ramsay ?” He called.

“Of course it is Matt, pick him up if you like.”

It all felt strange and a little surreal, picking up a child that wasn’t his, but still felt like part of their family. The boy wasn’t heavy, but he was definitely a little chubby. Whatever he was being fed on, was obviously doing him good.

“Wow, he’s a big guy.” He called.

“Yes, my milk dried up, but the scavengers owed me a few favours. They’ve been unexpectedly finding baby formula and food supplements all over the place. Between you and me, I think they’re actually looking for baby stuff.”

“Why do they owe you favours ?”

“Something else to tell you about, I’ve become a bit of an expert at looting, though the preferred term is scavenging. Your wife is now seen as a legendary obtainer of the unobtainable. Oh, sorry.....Should that be ex-wife ?”

Matt walked into the kitchen carrying a sleepy looking Ramsay in his arms.

“I’m still getting over the initial shock.....No, let’s call it surprise. We both have people in our lives, who’ll need to be considered in any decisions.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Said Deb. “Tell me.....Are you happy with Bren ?”

“Considering barely a week goes by without something trying to kill us, yes....My life has been surprisingly happy. Adding Ela to the crew helped, we’re a family, of a sort.”

“Ahh, the teenager with fire in her eyes. I bet you’ve had fun with that one.”

“Oh yes.” Said Matt.

“When I was trudging up the east coast of England with Iris, you were all I thought about Matt, truthfully. I’d have given anything to see your face again. Now though, Art and I may not be the sort of couple you get in romance novels, but we’re happy. We could just leave things the way we are.”

“I’d still like to be around, if that makes any sense ?”

“Oh yes, of course....Ramsay will need a kind of uncle he can talk to.” Said Deb. “There is no such thing as divorce now, but as we’re all happy as we are, it makes sense to stay that way.....With the partners we now have.”

It definitely wasn’t the way Matt had imagined things going. In his mind he’d thought of an angry confrontation, with Deb and Bren shouting abuse at each other. There was a slight feeling of guilt, as though he’d avoided a penance he deserved.

“Yes, that makes sense.” He said. “Though I need to talk it over with Bren, I can’t see her objecting.”

“Same here, I know Art will be fine with it. Now....Put Ramsay back in his cot and I’ll tell you all about my adventures with Iris Bouvard.”

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Tirsa Bates rarely hunted alone, she knew her mum would have gone crazy if she'd known. It was just that her brother wasn't well and with the deer being so plentiful. It meant a long walk, at least five miles to the best spot and then the same back again, all with a deer across her shoulders. She was strong though, far stronger in many ways than the girl who'd once lived in Tottenham. Her dad had called her a genuine warrior.

"Our very own Xena."

Which had made her happier than when Seb Govia had asked her out, and he'd been the coolest guy in her school. School.....That all seemed so long ago, as if she'd been someone different then, someone who'd never have gone hunting deer on her own, or even know how to use a bow properly. Her dad told her to take an assault rifle everywhere, just in case. She was good with the bow though and she could fire half a dozen arrows in the blink of an eye. Ok, maybe not that fast, but still pretty damn quickly.

"Where are the deer today?" She mumbled.

Tirsa was coming at their usual spot from downwind, she could feel a gentle breeze on her cheek. She had no idea what species of deer they were, just that they were quite small and tasted delicious. Any ideas she'd had about a vegetarian life had vanished once the realities of the war had turned any food into good food.

"We eat what we can get." Her dad said, quite often. "And we'll be thankful for it."

She could move silently, quieter than the wind, as she liked to think. Unless the deer caught her scent, she rarely went home without a kill over her shoulders. That was when Zane came in useful. Younger brothers had to have been created to carry stuff, there had to be a plus side to all that annoyance. Tirsa saw a deer feeding near a large tree, they often foraged between the trees. She strung an arrow, one of the really good ones. A little allowance for the breeze and....She let her arrow fly on its way.

"Sorry poor deer, we need you for the pot." She muttered.

Her arrow hadn't quite killed it, so she used her knife to cut its throat. Her knowledge on what to do with her kills was about a fifth from things learned at school in history, plus another fifth by watching her dad clean the turkey at Christmas. Gutting the bird really, taking out all the weird looking bits and pieces he referred to as giblets. The rest of her knowledge? That had come from experience, the trial-and-error method, learning from her mistakes. The, that didn't work, so don't do it that way again, method. For the meat to last, the animal had to be gutted there and then, immediately.

"Oh, I hate this bit." She muttered.

She did it right there, on top of the soil and leaf litter. There was a plastic sheet in her backpack, to wrap the carcass in to stop its blood running down her neck for the entire five mile walk home.

Credit for the sheeting really belonged to Zane, it had been his idea.

"I suppose brothers have their uses."

Tirsa cut the deer open and used her hands to scoop out the innards, the entrails and other bits she didn't recognise. The bits her dad used that nice catchall phrase to describe, the giblets. Not for the first time she felt warmly nostalgic for the days when you could buy a nice steak in the supermarket, nicely wrapped and ready to cook. A noise disturbed her daydreaming, it sounded like someone muttering.

"Hello." Said the creature.

It had to be able to move quietly, perhaps even as well as her. The face had a human look to it, which didn't match the furry skin and long tail. Tirsa didn't feel scared, it was the face which seemed to be smiling at her. It made no sense, but the creature felt like a person.

"Who are you?" She asked.

The creature made a sound, probably its name. Tirsa could have been offered her heart's desire to pronounce the name, yet still fail. Another sound came from her left, there were two of them. Probably a male in front of her, though his tale hid where his genitals were likely to be. He had no breasts though, unlike the female to her left. Actually, the female had six tiny breasts, all of them barely more than bumps with a nipple on the end. Both of them naked, though they were wearing bracelets and things around their necks. The female had a small quartz crystal, dangling from her neck on a chain. Their jewellery or looted? Tirsa decided it might not be polite to ask, or that safe. Both of them were looking at the giblets on the grubby soil, especially the liver. Her dad always said it was the best part of the kill, but she could never be bothered to light a fire to cook it.

"I could cook the liver." She said. "We could share it, if you want. I'd be honoured to share it with you."

"Thank you."

Very polite creatures, they sat on the ground and watched as she lit a small fire and waited for it to get nice and hot. The plastic sheeting was clean, it would make a decent surface to serve the food on. By the time the liver was on skewers just at the right, hopefully, height above the flames, her curiosity had returned.

"Where are you from?"

"We are the children of Vicky, the children of the children." Said the male.

"We are from everywhere, there are many of us." Said the female.

"But you never hurt people?"

The male shook his head.

"Never, it is forbidden." Said the female

"You speak English very well." Said Tirsa.

"Of course....It is our language."

No answer was ever close to what she'd expected, it was giving her a headache. Her mum said to always cook meat right through, as the deer might have parasites. Once it looked properly cooked, Tirsa sliced the liver up and created three separate heaps, which did look delicious. She pushed the food towards her guests, though neither of them moved.

"Eat....Please....Eat." She said.

They ate when she began to eat and judging by the speed with which they ate, they liked the liver. Tirsa was enjoying it too, she'd make time to cook and eat the liver on other hunting trips. Her dad always said there was something in offal that was good for you, he'd just been a bit shaky on knowing exactly what. The glow behind the clouds indicated it had to be mid-afternoon, by the time she and her guests finished eating.

"I have to leave now....I want to be home before dark." Said Tirsa.

They gave her a slight bow and left, vanishing quietly into the trees. Tirsa had put out the fire and covered the ashes in soil, before she picked up the plastic sheet. Her guests really had been polite and generous. There it was, the quartz crystal necklace the female had been wearing. She picked it up and put it around her neck.

"Oh hell, no matter how I tell mum about this, I'll be in trouble."

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