

Ishmael II : Pandora

Chapter 6 - Demolition

“The supermarket had once been an inviting place, even after the invasion. Shelves full of tins, aisles full of the soaps and shampoos she liked. Now the shelves were mostly empty and there had been a small fire near the tills.”



Kitty MacLaren tried not to admit to herself that she liked Áslaug Kárason because she looked like the female detective in all those Scandinavian cop shows. Tall with blonde hair and a jawline to kill for. Áslaug was a qualified doctor and just about the only person in the Fifth West Norwegian Base with any experience in pathology. Her English was perfect, with just the right amount of Norwegian accent to make her perfect for all those cop shows. Áslaug was currently taking samples from the dead body in the small area of the clinic used as a mortuary.

“Kåre definitely seems to have died from a respiratory problem.” Said Áslaug. “There are no bacterial infections, but we simply don’t have the equipment to analyse his lung fluid for viral infections.”

Poor Kåre hadn’t survived for that long and Anna was still refusing to come out of the room she’d been allocated. A data burst with a tentative cause of death had been sent to Filey, though it was still too early to say the young man had definitely died from the green death. The fact that Anna was still alive, healthy and sobbing in her room, added weight to the tentative assumption.

“A definitive cause of death would really speed things up.” Said Gene.

“Respiratory infection, pathogen unknown.” Said Áslaug. “That is the best I can do. If we had the resources of a major teaching hospital.....But we don’t. JV can keep sending requests, but I simply don’t know an exact cause of death for this young man.”

MacLaren’s fantasy cop figure was giving Gene the sort of look that would have had a TV villain running for the airport. It was going to get worse too, they were gradually leading up to the worst bit. Áslaug was going to hate them, which troubled Kitty, but there was nothing she could do to avoid it.

“I know you’re being asked to achieve the impossible.” Said Kitty. “Initially though your findings did indicate the green death as the cause of death.”

“I hadn’t heard of the green death a month ago.” Snapped Áslaug. “Yes, my tentative first attempt at a cause of death did suggest a lung infection not dissimilar to the pathogen they’re calling the green death in the Filey campus.”

“Look doc, no one is going to litigate if you get it wrong.” Said Gene. “If we set sixty percent certain as the bar, do you think young Kåre died of the green death ?”

“Yes, I do.”

Good, Kitty was able to tick off a main item on her mental list. Áslaug was looking at Gene and her as though they were bugs in her soup, but they were getting somewhere.

“Your answer means that Filey will need Kåre’s body.” Said Kitty. “Anna will need to go to Filey too, as she seems unaffected by the gas.”

“But Anna is a Norwegian citizen. You can’t simply take her to England as though she was a piece of baggage.”

Kitty exchanged a look with Gene. There were still a few of them around, those who thought the world still worked by pre-invasion rules. It seemed to be a way of coping with the unthinkable going on around them every day. One of the security guards still insisted on the science team wearing name badges.

"I'm sorry Áslaug, but we will be taking Anna to Filey. Hopefully she'll go voluntarily, though there will be no choice in the matter."

"I'll be going too." Said Gene.

He said it with a tone of voice that indicated a silent 'Yay' in front his words. Kitty would probably be returning to Norway, but Gene had escaped. He'd been assigned to help the Filey rocket team, permanently.

"I will be lodging a formal complaint with JV." Said Áslaug.

The moment had come and Kitty was wondering if they might actually need to handcuff someone who might be the last surviving pathologist in Norway.

"You may send whatever complaints you like." Said Kitty. "My orders are to get you on the helicopter too. You're expertise is needed in the Filey Campus."

"I thought it wasn't safe to use the helicopters at the moment ?"

"I'll be flying one of the supersonic gunships that can fly faster than sound, but still almost graze the treetops. You'll be safe Áslaug, I'll get you there in one piece."

"You promise ?"

"That's not the sort of thing....." Said Gene.

"I can promise and I will." Snapped Kitty. "I will get us all to Filey in one piece."

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Tirsa Bates had once walked through the woods near their home in a skirt and top, with brightly coloured trainers on her feet. Things had changed though and the nineteen year old was now far more cautious. There were less alien creatures around, it had been months since she'd seen a flying alien machine.

"There are less of them, but the ones left mean business."

According to her sixteen year old brother Zane, whose knowledge she respected more with each passing day. There were more of the wicked bronze coloured bots and the creatures who looked like men. Grotesque caricatures of men, but at night and at a distance.....Tirsa had once been so close to walking far too near to one of them.

"What are they up to now ?" She muttered.

Her brother wasn't far away, they never went out alone anymore. Her mum had helped Zane with his stealth clothing. Tirsa took great pride in the fact that the clothes she wore when patrolling, were all her own work. Dark trousers and top. Everything black or dark blue from head to foot. She even wore a mask that covered most of her face.

She nodded at her brother, who was leaning against a tree about fifty feet away. When she moved he'd follow. They were going past the supermarket, even past the Town Hall with an abandoned army tank outside. There had been strange sounds and lights at the far end of town, events that needed to be investigated. Tirsa moved and became a shadow among the trees.

"Something doesn't feel right today." She mumbled.

The supermarket had once been an inviting place, even after the invasion. Shelves full of tins, aisles full of the soaps and shampoos she liked. Now the shelves were mostly empty and there had been a small fire near the tills. Tirsa nodded at her brother and moved on. She was good at keeping hidden, even when moving through streets, walking silently on paving stones and using doorways for cover.

Tirsa moved slowly most of the time, definitely no sudden movements. Zane joined her behind the burned out tank on the Town Hall steps.

"I saw two more damaged wall crawlers." Said Zane. "Are we doing anything about them?"

He was accepting her as the leader of their patrols now and she was actually listening to his advice. It wouldn't last of course, it never did. Tirsa gave it three months until they were at each other's throats again, maybe a bit less. That just seemed to be how it was with brothers and sisters and she'd learned to accept it and deal with it.

"No, not today." She said. "We have other things to do. The older creatures are all dying anyway....Still damn dangerous though."

"They might end up at our house."

"Maybe, but mum and dad can handle themselves."

The older alien creatures were dying, though few seemed to reach the point of actually being dead. They found them on their patrols, hanging from trees and walls. One Tirsa had been watching for months was still slightly quivering if she moved close to it. The damn things were likely to be a hazard for months to come, maybe even years. The newer alien robots and creatures were fewer in number, though most seemed improved in some way. Fewer in number and far more brutal. As her dad had pointed out quite a few times, the new ones meant business.

"We'll cut behind the post office, then through the park." She said. "That'll bring us out near the Three Doors pub. From there we should be able to see what's going on."

"Be careful in the park."

"I will." She replied.

Tirsa moved, knowing her brother would be about fifteen feet behind her. By trial, error and survival, they'd learned techniques it sometimes took combat soldiers a long time to master, if they ever did. One wall of the post office building had a huge crack in it and signs of an explosion, though they had no idea what had occurred. Another early victim of the invasion had been the morning news on PopNet. Some of the big green lizard like creatures could detonate if they were seriously injured, causing an explosion capable of cracking stone walls.

Tirsa nodded at her brother and entered the park, with its overgrown plant beds and deceptively harmless looking trees. The huggers liked trees, the cat sized monsters with razor sharp teeth and claws. She had a bow and she was really good at using it. Arrows were scarce though and hard to make. Certainly not to be wasted on creatures who were in the process of dying. She passed the tree with the hugger that had been dying for a very long time. It still managed a slight trembling movement as she walked past.

"The damn things.....Don't they ever truly die." She mumbled.

An arrow in just the right place would kill it, or fire got the job done. Not that she intended to kill the hugger, its dying process was too useful. Tirsa went through the park slowly and carefully. It was rare to see one of the creatures who looked like men, but one was at the far side of the park. There it was, huddled against the ground in the posture of someone in trouble. She gave a slow deliberate wave to her brother and pointed at the creature. It was one of the new and improved versions, very dangerous.

"Now you..... You're worth one of my best arrows." She muttered.

Genuine hunting arrows made in a factory somewhere and far better than her homemade ones.

They'd been in the home of the young couple who were now dead. A bow had been with the arrows, but hers was far better. Tirsa aimed an arrow from the cover of an evergreen tree, using its trunk to

lean against as she took a deep breath. There was a spot on the creature, just below its head and slightly to the back of its neck.

“Please.....If you exist, let me kill this damn thing.” She mumbled.

To her God was like an overprotective relative who she only contacted when she really, really, really needed help. She could hit the right spot nine times out of ten, but if she missed..... The creatures could run fast, maybe faster than her. Her only hope then was to climb, they weren't good at clambering up walls or climbing trees.

Tirsa fired her arrow and whatever governs luck was on her side. The creature jumped up, they always did that if she hit the right spot. Out went its arms and there was the smell of electricity, like the smell when dad did something in the loft, that melted half the fuses in the meter cupboard.

“Wow, you got another one sis.”

Zane stood next to her as they watched the brute fall over, its arms still outstretched. It looked so human, like a creature made of flesh, blood and bones, just like her. All the electrical sparking and flashing though.....Whatever it was, the monster wasn't right, it wasn't natural.

“These ones don't spark for that long.” She said. “I should be able to recover my arrow next week.”

They were still respectful of the dead beast though, keeping well away from it as it sparked and shuddered as it died. Past the end of the park was the Three Doors Tavern, then the old multiplex cinema building that was now a gymnasium. The only way of telling what it had once been, was a sign so faded that it was hard to read unless the sunlight was just right. Only now the building was gone and the town seemed to end at the far side of the Three Doors.

“Fuck.” Said Tirsa.

“Where did it go ?” Asked Zane. “All of it.....Where did it go ?”

There had been a church at that side of town, a Methodist church she seemed to remember. A parade of shops with a pharmacy and somewhere she'd once found a pair of shoes that fitted her now dead sister. Now they weren't there, she found it hard to remember what most of the shops had once sold.

“It's them, the aliens, has to be.” She said. “We need to tell mum and dad, this is terrible news.”

“Why would the aliens demolish half the town ?”

“Demolished and cleared away afterwards Zane. The big question is why they stopped before finishing the job....Look, you can see the marks of tracked vehicles in the ground.”

“You think they'll come back ?” Asked Zane.

“Yes, definitely.....Come on, we have to go home.”

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Helen Mateo seemed to spend most of the day in their kitchen garden, tending the plants that would keep them fed right through the following winter. Some might have thought her life was dull, maybe even boring. Helen liked her days out in the garden though, even when it rained for days on end. Sometimes both of her children helped her, but today it was just Tom. The boy tried hard to be useful and sometimes, he was.

“That's it Tom, another cane where the wind pulled over the runner beans.”

She'd have to help him push the cane into the ground, but he worked hard and he was learning all the time.

“Come on, finish this and you can feed the chickens.”

“Really.....Great.”

The chickens were relatively new, found during a family excursion into a village to the north of Big Town, the two houses, one uninhabitable, and barn they called home. They'd gone looking for

tinned food and cookware. Tina had found the chickens, five of them, still pecking away in someone's back garden. Mateo had repurposed a shed as a home for their new livestock and once they realised they were being fed every day, the birds had settled in. No eggs from the birds, or likely to be, they were destined to be treats for the pot on high days and holidays. For some reason Tom considered being allowed to feed the birds as his high spot of the day.

"Can I feed them now?"

"Help me get these beans tied up first."

Tina had been given a limit for her foraging of no further from the house than her ability to count the slates on the roof. A nifty idea of her husband's, but their daughter totally ignored the rule. Her daughter's shouting as she ran didn't surprise Helen, but the blood on her hands did.

"Mum.....Mum...A car fell into the hole in the road."

That was over a mile away and well and truly broke the rules. It looked like the rain had caused a large sinkhole in the road to the west. The hole was a good twenty feet deep and obviously there was no signage or warning cones. It was a trap that could well claim anyone driving at night and by the sound of it, the sinkhole had claimed a victim.

"Oh Tina, your hands.....I told you to be careful when you find things."

"It's not my blood mum."

In many ways that made it worse. There had been an occasion when both her children had found bodies while looting. Bodies fresh enough to stain their hands and clothing with fluids Helen didn't want to think about.

"We've told you, your father and me.....So many times...."

"He's alive mum....One of the soldiers is still alive."

"Soldiers?"

"Yes mum, the people in the car had soldiers with them."

"Come on my girl, first we'll clean you up, then we'll find your father.....You too Tom, the chickens can wait a while for their food."

"But.....But mum, we need to go now. He's still alive....The soldier." Yelled Tina.

"And he'll still be alive after you've been cleaned up.....And if he isn't, then we couldn't have saved him anyway."

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Alejandro Lopez didn't like arguments, but he realised a huge decision had to be made. The ruined mansion Steve Penboss had brought them to was more comfortable than sleeping out in the open, though only just. It was cold and damp, with a hole in the floorboards in one corridor, that meant a drop of about ten feet into the basement. His daughter wasn't stupid and they had rigged up a few barriers, but kids will be kids. He lived in constant dread of Maria falling through the hole. It wasn't as if that was the only potential danger, rotten floorboards existed throughout the old house.

"When it rains, it's like living in a shower." Said Tracy. "A shower of dirty water....We can't stay here."

His wife was right of course, it was just that he didn't fancy more upheaval. After nearly a year of being constantly on the move they'd found a home with Jada and Luis. When the aliens had chased them out of there, they'd been taken in by Steve. When that house had been destroyed, they'd moved into their current cold damp and very temporary accommodation.

"I'd just like to stay here long enough to get my bearings." He said. "Not too long.....Just until it doesn't feel we're constantly running away from something."

"I understand, I really do.....But we've Maria to consider." Said Tracy.

His wife held his hand and gave him one of her warmest smiles. None of that made him feel any better. He wanted to stay at the ruined mansion for a while, as did Daisy. Steve on the other hand wanted to begin walking towards the house of a friend he knew on the coast, roughly to the north west. As for Jada and Luis ? They'd opted out of the whole voting process and were willing to stay, or follow Steve.

"His place is really remote, miles from anywhere. No aliens will bother us there."

Steve had assured them, with such eagerness that Tracy had voted to leave the previous evening. Lately their communal evening meal had turned into constant wars, especially since the leave or stay vote had been locked in stalemate. Alejandro was currently wondering if it might be easiest to simply give in and hope Steve's friend really did have the perfect place to wait out the worst of the invasion. Though he did remember Steve saying his own house was too remote to be worth a visit by the alien robots.

"Will Steve's friend take us all in ?" He asked. "We are a sizeable group now."

"Daisy knows the guy and says he's cool. It appears he used to be lead guitarist in a rock group once. He has a come one, come all philosophy on life." Said Tracy

"Until we all turn up and he says bugger off."

Tracy gave him the look she usually reserved for Maria when she was being awkward. He wasn't just digging his heel in for the sake it though. They were sat outside the mansion during a rare hour when the rain wasn't coming down in torrents. The last thing he wanted was another row.

"Alright.....One more assurance from Steve that this Vince guy won't tell us to scram....And I'll agree to pack up and leave this place."

He'd been manipulated and he knew it. Her smile though and the thank you kiss, made it all seem worthwhile. He'd known Tracy since primary school and he'd promised her rather bemused mother three things when they were old enough to date.

"I'll never hurt your daughter, bring her home pregnant, or cause her to cry."

He'd managed two out of the three, but only a fool promises he'll never make a girl cry. He'd been young of course and green as grass. Later he realised that life, pain and tears tend to go hand in hand. Tracy stopped kissing him and pointed over his shoulder.

"Look.....It's a helicopter."

"It can't be."

"Nothing else makes that noise."

It was a large double rotor helicopter and it was moving quite slowly, approaching at tree top height. It went round the old mansion, the pilot actually waving as they turned for another circuit. By the time they were coming round again, everyone was there to wave back.

"Where do you think it came from ?" Asked Daisy. "It proves that not all the military bases have been destroyed."

"Look.....He waved at me." Shouted Maria.

"Coast guard, it definitely has the coast guard emblem on the side." Said Steve.

"Brave people.....If an alien saucer drone sees them." Muttered Tracy.

The helicopter dropped leaflets before turning and heading away to the west. Lots of leaflets, all picked up and blown away by the wind. It became a bit of a game, trying to be the first to get hold of one of the leaflets. Yellow paper with bold black writing, though it was Daisy who was the first to actually read one. By the time she came running back with it, Maria had already handed him the one she'd hunted and cornered near the empty fish pond.

"It's from the interim government of Devon and Cornwall." Said Alejandro. "It appears they're finding and evacuating survivors to a coast guard base near Combe Martin."

"How do we get there ?" Asked Steve.

"There'll be coming back tomorrow....After Combe Martin, survivors will be transported to a secure facility in Jersey." Said Alejandro.

"I've always wanted to visit Jersey." Said Tracy.

Poor Daisy looked a bit deflated as she waved her leaflet about, only to find out they'd already read it, or at least most of it.

"From Jersey survivors will be selected for resettling in a new long term home." She read.

"Hmmm that sounds a bit ominous" Said Steve. ".....Selected means some won't be.....Selected I mean. Are we going to accept the invite ?"

"Can we say no ? It is the government." Said Tracy.

"Interim government.... Probably self-appointed." Said Daisy.

"Better than staying here or hoping Vince takes us in." Said Alejandro.

A vote was taken, which gave a unanimous vote, even Maria had put her hand up. They were going to pack all their things and get on the helicopter when it returned. Jada hobbled out of the house ten minutes after the helicopter had gone.

"What are you all so excited about ?" She asked.

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Navigation at sea hadn't completely returned to an age when three masted wooden sailing ships set off to find the fabled lands to the west, but it was getting pretty close. Charts were the key, they had really good charts, a compass and a navigation system that remembered where they'd been. Matt Newman confidently stabbed his index finger on the paper chart.

"We're there." He said. "Definitely.....Or at least as close to there as makes no odds."

The math had been done on the back of an old invoice for marine diesel fuel, but he'd done pretty well at navigation by dead reckoning in the army.

"Dead reckoning.....Get it wrong and you're dead." His old instructor used to say, often.

Plus the navigation system was giving their location as somewhere in the same ballpark. It was the early hours of the morning anyway and they'd all had far too much to drink, which wasn't unusual.

The only difference was that Doug Barrett was with them now, another person to get quite random after a few glasses of anything alcoholic. Bren looked at where his finger was resting.

"The Java Sea, heading north." Said Bren. "A hundred kilometres from anywhere."

"Probably close to two hundred." He said. "There are a few inhabited islands though, if we fancy exploring."

"The islands can be a bit lawless." Said Doug. "The safest bet is to carry on north to Pontianak. I know people there, people I trust."

Not a fantastic reference from an admitted dealer in contraband, but Doug had never lied to them, as far as they knew.

"So....It looks like we're going to Pontianak on the Indonesian coast." Said Matt.

"I've never heard of Pontianak. Is it a big place ?" Asked Bren.

"It's the provincial capital Bren, not a few huts in the jungle." Said Doug. "If anywhere in the region is still functioning normally, it'll be Pontianak."

"Sounds better and better." Said Matt.

On big ocean going freighters, the crew often couldn't see the ocean from where they ate and slept. The Eleanor was different, she'd been designed as a leisure craft for wealthy people, who probably

enjoyed a decent view of the sea. From the lounge they had a good view of the lights approaching from the north.

“They’re not hanging around.” Said Doug. “The lights are low down too....Weird.”

They looked for all the world like the two eyes of some huge beast. The two large lights were rapidly increasing in size, as some kind of vessel hurtled towards them. Matt didn’t know why, it wasn’t necessarily a wise thing to do, but he killed the engine and left them drifting with the currents.

“Lights too.....We need to go silent and dark.” He said.

They were quickly merely a dark shadow on a night with just a cloud covered new moon. The Eleanor bobbed about on the ocean swell like a large piece of flotsam.

“I think.....Yes, it’s slowing down.” Said Bren.

“Shush.....Not a sound.” Said Matt.

There was something unnerving about watching those two light coming towards them. It had been heading for them, that much was certain. Now their craft was no longer as well-lit as a noisy Christmas tree, with powerful engines announcing their presence....The approaching craft began to move in a zig zag. He jumped as Bren grabbed his arm in the near perfect darkness.

“They’re looking for us.” She whispered in his ear. “Has to be them, the aliens.”

He’d never heard of the aliens having sea going vessels, but he thought she was probably right. The aliens had taken control of the air within weeks and destroyed any land armies sent against them in a matter of months. It seemed only reasonable that they’d have an effective navy.

“It’s going to come very close to us.” He whispered.

They all moved carefully and quietly towards that side of the lounge, as the alien vessel went past. It had to be some sort of submarine running on the surface. The two lamps were barely above the water, yet its glowing phosphorescent wake hinted at a craft over a hundred feet long. The Eleanor actually shook as the huge submarine went past. He hugged Bren in the darkness and felt sorry for Doug, who had no one to hug in the dark.

“They’re zig zagging again.” Said Bren.

Those two huge lamps that looked like monstrous eyes, did two more search patterns, before heading south. Matt left it for at least fifteen minutes before starting the engines and turning on the lights.

“That thing was huge.....Why us though ?” Asked Bren. “It actually seemed to be searching for us.”

“Don’t take it personally.....They were probably on the way south, saw us and got curious.” Said Matt.

“Makes you think though....Makes you think.” Said Doug.

“It does indeed; we’ll have to take a turn each at being on watch during the night from now on.”

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Mateo Lopez heard the whole story on the run, what there was of it. A daughter who’d been scavenging way too far from the house and she’d found a car. Helen had told him about the blood on his daughter’s hands, so she’d definitely discovered something. A wounded soldier in a car sounded something that needed investigating, but his daughter.....Tina was a little hyperactive and sometimes what was happening in her head, didn’t match reality.

“Wow.....When you said a car Tina.....” He said.

“I told you, the soldier is leaning against a tree.”

His daughter wanted to rush on ahead, but Helen got a firm hold on her.

“No, stay with Tom.... Your father and I can handle this now.”

To a nine year old girl out scavenging, the vehicle in the sinkhole probably was a car. There had been a fire and much of the bodywork was scorched. Damage aside there was no denying that the halftrack in the sinkhole was a military museum piece, a war machine from a bygone age.

"I've seen pictures of course, but to see one up close." Said Helen. "This thing has to be over a hundred years old."

"No way to charge electric cars and hydrogen supplies can't be replaced." He said. "I suppose dragging antiques like this out of museums had to be expected."

"They've even converted it to methane." Said Helen.

"Yes....The bag of gas on the roof. I remember seeing that in the war museum. It looks like the methane gas ignited during the crash."

Very little of the gasbag remained and about ninety percent of the military vehicle was down the hole in the road. It still looked an impressive vehicle, despite its age. They found the rear doors of the vehicle open and the wounded man leaning against a roadside hawthorn bush. His wife hadn't forgotten to grab their first aid kit in the rush. They didn't have many medical supplies, but the wounded man was welcome to what they had. Helen knelt beside the man.

"No pulse.....And he's not breathing." She said. "Still warm, so he must have died shortly after Tina found him."

"I feel sorry for Tina, she'll cry for days."

"I don't think he's a soldier, well....Not an official soldier." Said Helen. "His fatigues look homemade. Well made, someone put some care into it.....Which means someone out there will be wondering where he is."

The dead man looked to be in his late twenties. Mateo began to picture a grieving widow or mother somewhere, before he deliberately moved his thoughts onto something else.

"Any form of ID on him?" He asked.

Helen rummaged through pockets, finding only a key and a small pocketknife.

"Definitely not real army....No ID disks." Said Helen.

Mateo would never have described himself as heroic. He'd reached the age of thirty five without doing anything more dangerous than a sponsored parachute jump for charity. Even then it had been a buddy jump, with a professional skydiver strapped to his back. Since the invasion though.....He'd changed.

"I should check the inside of the halftrack." He said. "Someone might have survived."

"Don't go too far in.....Just as far as there's light from the doors."

He liked the way Helen didn't start telling him not to go inside the vehicle. She'd changed too and she understood that there were no emergency services, no first responders. It was up to them to see if anyone inside the burned military vehicle needed help. Mateo looked down the sinkhole, before opening the doors as wide as they'd go.

"The light isn't bad in there and the front has hit the bottom of the sinkhole." He said. "I'm pretty sure this thing isn't going anywhere once I start clambering about."

"Just be careful.....Fucking careful."

A smile and a kiss, there had to be a kiss. Just in case. Mateo wasn't that heavy, but the vehicle did wobble a little as he climbed into the back. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the gloom and saw three, maybe four people. They'd been pushed right up against the far wall of the enclosed part of the halftrack. The driver would have been in a separate cab at the front, probably with someone in there with him. Mateo didn't give much for their chances, once the methane fire had taken hold.

"I can see them Helen....I'm going inside."

There was bench seating against the left hand side, which he used as a ladder. He found two men first, scrunched up together and very obviously dead. Not burnt really, their skin looked as though they'd been cooked.

"The methane must have burned really hot." He yelled. "Two men here, both dead....A dreadful way to die."

"Any ID on them."

"I'll check."

They looked so smart in what looked like properly pressed suits. The heat had scorched the cloth in places, but the men must have looked very smart before their driver had missed seeing the sinkhole in the dark. One of the men had a piece of cardboard in his pocket. All Mateo could read in the semidarkness was the top line, which had been printed large and bold.

"One of them is carrying a ration card." He yelled. "Hang on.....So is the other one."

It was easier to see from inside, the trail of blood where the dead guy outside had clambered up the bench seating to get out. Mateo tried to ignore the death surrounding him, as he moved to the two people on the other side of the vehicle. Two women in smart clothes, though once again everything they wore had a homemade look about it.

"Jeez Helen, is Tina there ? I don't want her to hear this."

"No, she's looking for berries with Tom."

"They all look as though they've been cooked, the fire must have been incredibly intense. No sign of ration cards on the two women I found, but their outfits don't have pockets. One of them has a leather briefcase on her lap. It's scorched, but the contents might still be intact. I'll bring it out with me."

"Careful how you move....Everything is wobbling a bit too much."

The museum piece of a vehicle wobbled as he climbed out of it. It had become fairly well wedged into the hole though and couldn't go far. Mateo was still relieved to be away from all the bodies. He hadn't really noticed the smell when he was inside, probably too much stress. He doubted if he'd ever get the smell of burnt flesh out of his nose. He handed one of the ration cards to Helen.

"Weekly ration for a Paul Duncan." She said. "Issued by the Interim Government of Devon and Cornwall. Might be alright, or they might be...."

"An extremist militia best avoided like the plague." He said. "After being in the bunker, I'm wary of even letting them know we exist. The contents of the briefcase might tell us more about them."

"Later.....First problem is what to do with our unknown soldier. Tina will ask you know and keep on asking. Do we bury him ? I've no intention of burying the others by the way."

To him the answer was obvious, even if his God fearing mother would never have forgiven him for saying it.

"Burying him here would bring attention to our presence." He said.

"Leave him and our daughter will put hedgerow flowers on his corpse, forever. You know she will, no matter how often we tell her not to."

"I know.....We need to put him back inside the halftrack." He said.

"Good idea."

A fairly well muscled and heavy guy, but together they easily swung his body up and into the back of the wrecked halftrack. There was a definite audible ringing sound as the body hit the far wall of the vehicle. Mateo looked at his wife.

"That's it Helen, we're going to hell."

"Probably."

The doors were heavy, far harder to lift than the dead soldier. Once they were past halfway, they closed with a resounding clang.

"Tina will never get those open." Said Helen.

"Maybe we should use reverse psychology." He said. "Tell her it's alright to scavenge a mile from the house. She just might stay home to spite us."

"Yeah right, she'll just up her game and wander two miles from Big Town."

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Ishmael had tried to obtain the music synthesiser the nice way. Four of the campus professors had formed a rock group though, one that had survived the loss of the original drummer and a fist fight. Yes, it seemed that professors of theoretical physics could sometimes lose their rag, just like everyone else. Bribery was difficult in their new cashless society, though Ish had promised them the two bottles of Potemkin that Deb Newman had given Biff and him as a present. His bribe had been refused. It seemed the professors put their music above hedonism. In the end, Ish had simply arranged for the synthesiser to be stolen.

"Not really stolen, more in the way of liberated." He told Biff.

"Wow, did you go and do it on your own?"

He had to tell her the truth, she'd hear it all on the campus grapevine anyway.

"I went to see Francine, she's still in the phase of giving me anything I ask for. Then there's the fact that no one seems to get on with the department of theoretical physics. She sent four of the security team to get the synthesiser for me."

"Using the hired muscle huh....There's a mobster boss inside you somewhere Ish, I always knew it.....Does it work?"

"It does Biff, it really does....Watch and get ready to be amazed."

Yes, he was overdoing the whole P T Barnum thing, but the device he'd put together really did work. The rock group would never have a music synthesiser again, but all scientific advances came with a price.

"Understanding a few words was wonderful, but it wasn't really speech." He said. "Then I realised that a music synthesiser doesn't care if the audience can hear the sounds. As I suspected....With a few modifications, it will happily record and use the sub sonic sounds that Horace uses. It took a bit of trial and error....but. Did I mention the link to the main campus AI?"

"Just show me Ish, before I really do live up to my name and Biff you."

It wouldn't look that impressive, there was a time delay of about two and a half seconds. Not much of a delay, but it was beginning to be irksome, it interfered with the flow of conversation between him and Horace. Ish turned on the microphone.

"Hello Horace, how are you today?"

The AI looked up the right alien words, which it sent to the synthesiser. Horace heard the sub sonic sounds and replied. The AI picked up the reply as input to the synthesiser and all being well, after two and a half seconds...

"Hello Ishmael, I am very well thank you."

It was gratifying to see Biff have that jaw dropping moment, when she heard an alien speak for the first time. Inka's kids had gone crazy and if Biff was like them, he knew what was coming next.

"You have to let me have a go." She said. "The second person on Earth to communicate with Horace."

Actually she'd be about the third or fourth, Inka's kids had been quite persuasive.

“We’re still working with a limited vocabulary Biff, keep it simple. Don’t expect too much, any long or technical words will confuse Horace.”

“Alright.....Let me get to the microphone.”

He remembered the thrill when it had worked, and he’d exchanged his first complete sentence with a sentient being who hadn’t been born on planet Earth.

“My name is Biff.... What is your name ?”

“Hello Biff, my name is Horace.”

Biff looked at him, the kids had given him the same look.

“We’re working with an AI driven language parser. To the AI she’s Horace, so it uses the word Horace. Ask her what her name means.”

“What does your name mean ?”

“My name is warm wind over the forest.”

Biff just looked at him for a second, as though it was all a huge confidence trick, or magic, or a weird hybrid of both.

“Fuck..... You actually did it Ish. Is Horace cooperating.... Do you know how she feels ?”

“Not with any certainty, we may never understand her emotions. Abstract ideas are going to be incredibly tough. I think she’s excited by it all though.”

Ish grabbed the microphone.

“Would you like some cabbage balls ?”

“Yes please Ishmael..... Lots of them.”

“She’s shimmering, I can see her shimmering with pleasure.” Said Biff.

“Horace does love her cabbage balls.”

They both fed Horace, taking it in turns to stroke her skin, which rippled and shimmered in obvious pleasure.

“Of course, there is a chance she’ll deliberately tell us fake information.” Said Ish. “I hope not, but we’d be silly to trust her, at least for a while. Did you get the information you wanted from Norway, on the green death ?”

“Better than that, JV authorised them to use an aircraft to bring the body here. Kitty MacLaren should be here just before nightfall, and she’s bringing the girl who survived.”

“A dangerous flight, I hope they arrive in one piece.” Said Ish.

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