

Ishmael II : Pandora

Chapter 8 – Pontianak

“They might have shot the poor girl if she hadn’t kept so still, until they were almost on top of her. Crushed up among the large bags of rice at the back of the shop, she looked about sixteen or so.”



Sosnovka was a small rural community in the Lovozersky District of Murmansk Oblast, Russia. Or at least it had been until something dreadful had happened to the small town on the Kola Peninsula. In a part of the world where a town population of forty or fifty souls was fairly normal, someone had thought Sosnovka was worth destroying.

“Why do this ?” Asked Lianne Verga. “How could these people pose a threat, to anyone ?”

It had been the alien machines of course, there were the remains of one or two small greens among the debris. It must have once been an idyllic rural community, at least on a sunny day when the air temperature was above freezing. Every house had been destroyed, even the one road into town had been cratered.

“There have always been rumours of military bases in this area.” Said JV. “Probably nonsense, but the aliens were probably destroying every potential threat, just to be sure.”

It had all happened early on in the invasion, bodies no longer looked like human remains. The weather in that part of Russia was famously severe. Whatever body tissues a few bad winters hadn’t broken down, had been at the mercy of any wild creature looking for a meal.

“No sign of the enemy sir, this all happened a long time ago.”

One of their protection team said to her father. They were seeing fewer signs of the aliens all the time and it had been weeks since the last attack by an alien flying machine. All good news as it had also been quite some time since they’d lost one of the soldiers who kept them safe. Quite a large team of the best soldiers Fifty West had, but she rarely saw more than a dozen at one time. Most of their forces were patrolling areas JV intended to move to and the surrounding countryside.

“We’ll be here for two hours.” Someone said. “The boats are coming across from the mainland.”

A tent was quickly put up among the ruins of a farmhouse, her father was never left to the mercy of the weather. Knowles made them tea on an absurd looking contraption made from a gas camping stove. Knowles was a middle aged man who looked after her father while they were on the road, and cooked meals for her too. A servant really, though her father preferred the word factotum.

“It’s so long since we saw a flying device.” She said. “I do wonder if it’s worth living like this. We seem to always be moving further away from the Fifth West bases.”

“I have to rely on my advisers and they’re still telling me to stay in hiding.” Said JV. “They thought no one was watching them in Norway, until they were bombed. And the Filey Campus lost six senior members of the science team, who thought it’d be safe to go out looking for samples. I have no intention of putting either of us at risk my dear, or Knowles.”

“Much appreciated sir.” Said Knowles.

Like everyone he called her father JV most of the times, but ‘Sir’ when he considered it to be appropriate.

“So we’re heading deeper into Russia ?”

Lianne hoped her tone of voice indicated her disapproval of the plan. She had nothing against Russia per se, there were probably few Russian soldiers left alive to threaten anyone. It was just that a move into mainland Russia, meant moving further away from their operational bases.

“Yes, we’ve a fifty kilometre trip by boat, before arriving at Koyda. The troops scouting ahead found the village to be intact. There are even a few civilians still living there. Two night in Koyda and then we’ll move further east. Deeper into Russia. I know…….But my advisers say we’ll be safer there.”

“You know best father.” She said.

Her tone of voice must have been just right, Knowles actually smiled at her and winked. After tea and a hurried meal of berries gathered as they moved, someone told them the boats were ready. Sosnovka was barely above sea level and they needed to cross sodden ground to get to the boats. Sodden ground covered in grasses, it felt more like wading than walking. Strangely she didn’t mind the harshness of the Russian winter, or the feeling of cold water getting into her boots. It was boredom that drove her crazy and getting into open boats in a marshland wasn’t boring.

“One of the teams on the mainland came under fire sir, we’re holding our position here until we get the all clear.” Said another soldier she didn’t recognise.

Her father could have said ‘I told you so,’ but he didn’t. Their encrypted comms devices just about reached across to the mainland. Reports came in of two dead Fifth West fighters, with two more wounded. Half an hour later, they set off and reached Koyda well before dusk.

“They bombed the village, it seems to be their way now.” Said JV. “They’re waiting for the Green Death to do its worst, while bombing anything they don’t like the look of. Bombing from high altitude of course, so we’ve no chance of fighting back….Our alien friends are learning and getting too damn good at this kind of war.”

Koyda had only been a small village with just a few houses and now half of those were still burning. Some of their troops knew enough Russian to talk to the villagers, who said they’d never been attacked before.

“So far out into the middle of nowhere, they thought they were safe.” Said Knowles.

“Until our advance scouts caught the attention of an alien satellite, or maybe a drone.” Said JV. “We owe them an apology……I’ll make sure they have some of our rations when we leave.”

“We’re still going to stay here ?” Asked Lianne.

“Lightning doesn’t strike twice my dear.” Said JV. “They’re unlikely to bomb somewhere they’ve already destroyed. We’ll stay here for two days and……Our soldiers can help to at least make sure the locals have shelter against the infamous Russian winter.”

Lianne kissed her father on the cheek and was rewarded with a bemused look.

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Doug Barrett knew there was something badly wrong, when they passed Jungkat on the way up the river towards Pontianak. The city of Pontianak was a provincial capital boasting several four star hotels and a thriving business district. Now most of the famous skyscrapers were on fire.

“I can see a jetty on the port side.” Said Bren. “Looks a safer bet than going right into the heart of the city.”

“That jetty is for Khatulistiwa Park.” Said Doug. “There’s a place there where you can stand right on the equator. I took my kids there once……A long time ago.”

Long before the divorce, his wife getting custody and before he turned a hobby into a career. Doug had always enjoyed the thrill of running contraband in a fast boat, even before it became his main way of putting food on the table. Bren looked at him when he mentioned kids, but he didn’t feel any obligation to explain the comment.

"Yeah, it looks relatively safe there." Said Matt. "Less things to catch fire and collapse in a park." Bren was good at handling the Eleanor, a real natural. Doug had been surprised to learn that she hadn't really liked boats until necessity had forced her to learn, and learn quickly. The river had always been full of small boats and many of them were now burning, or in the process of sinking. One burning tourist boat was right in their way, but Bren avoided it like a pro.

"This all happened fairly recently." She said. "We arrived just too late, or too early, depending on how you look at it. We could head out to sea and forget this place?"

"No, we need fuel again.....And a few supplies." Said Matt.

Once the boat was tied up, Doug took them into the park and showed them the monument to mark the equator. Yes, there was a disaster happening in the city, but everyone had to see the monument, it was famous.

"We chose the right side of the river." Said Matt. "The entire south bank looks to be on fire."

"The worst blaze is coming from the main hospital." Said Doug. "This is bad.....Very bad."

Doug took them along the road that ran beside the river. For the first time they saw fleeing people, most looking as though they were office workers. Worryingly they were all running downriver, making for the coast, while he was leading Matt and Bren up river, deeper into the burning city. Very few of the refugees would stop to talk, though one or two mentioned being saved by devils.

"What are they saying Doug?" Asked Bren.

"They keep saying the devils saved them from the aliens. My Indonesian is good and I know what they're saying, even if it does sound crazy."

He was having to think of plans on the fly and then either abandon them or modify them as they moved. The number of fleeing people became greater, as they came to where the river divided in two. Again, just a few of them were willing to stop and tell them what had happened to the city.

"Crap, Landak Bridge has been destroyed." Said Doug. "I was hoping to head south once we got across the bridge."

"We're in your hands Doug. Where do we go now?" Asked Matt.

Tempting to say back to the boat, but there were so many people mentioning the devils killing aliens, that his curiosity was gaining control over his common sense. He spun around once to get his bearings. A city on fire looked nothing like it had when he'd been there with friends, enjoying a night out.

"North, we'll need to risk the built up areas." He said. "A good friend and his family run a small supermarket about a kilometre from here. A small place they'd call a Bodega in other parts of the world. They're good people.....If they survived."

"We keep moving further away from the Eleanor." Said Bren.

"Your choice guys, we can stay here or make a run for it." Said Doug. "Personally, I'd like to find out a little more about these devils who seem to be able to kick alien ass."

"So would I." Said Matt.

"Alright, I know when I'm outvoted." Said Bren. "Take us to your friend's Bodega."

North past several restaurants that had opened up to serve breakfast to the office workers. Most were damaged, some were nothing but ruins. One stood out because it looked perfect, as though you could go in and order coffee and a croissant. The dead body just inside the doorway stopped any thoughts of going inside and seeing if there were any nibbles to grab.

"I loved this city....To see it like this." Said Doug.

"Most of the major cities around the world have been nothing but ruins for over a year." Said Bren.

It was like telling a victim of assault that one of their neighbours had been assaulted too, it didn't help. The entire frontage of a vocational school had collapsed into the street, so they had to clamber over the rubble. A little further up the street, they found their first dead aliens, a whole squad of bronze coloured robots that some called metal men.

"Whoever these devils are, they don't mess about." Said Matt.

"Those holes torn into them....It looks like they were bitten." Said Bren. "What sort of creature can bite through metal armour?"

"One that appears to be on our side." Said Doug.

His friend's Bodega was in a side street behind a junior school. Only a kilometre or so outside the city centre, yet the entire area looked green, with almost a countryside feel to it. Luck was smiling on them, his friend's shop looked undamaged, though the door was half open.

"Hang on." Said Matt.

Matt pulled a shotgun out of a bag he'd insisted on bringing with him. Now Doug was glad Matt had delayed them by putting a few 'essentials,' into the bag. Matt held up the shotgun, the business end pointed at the entrance to the Bodega.

"Ready." Said Matt.

"Be careful...My friends have small children."

"He knows what he's doing." Said Bren.

Doug went in first, shouting out his friend's name, with Matt close behind him. There was no power and the back of the shop was hidden in shadows.

"I saw someone move.....Fadhlan is that you? Don't be scared it's me, it's Doug."

Matt moved to one side, putting some heavy shelving between him and the back of the store. Bren came up from behind, squeezing his shoulder.

"Shout again Doug." She said.

"Fadhlan.....How is Amisha? She must be three by now. It's me Doug....Doug Barrett the smuggler."

Matt was good with the shotgun and he was fast. As the shape ran from the back of the Bodega, there were two loud bangs. The booms from the shotgun deafened him for a few seconds, the loud bangs seeming to echo around the inside of his head.

"Fuck Matt....Did you shoot my friend?" He asked.

"No, it was one of the.....Things that look like us."

Close up it didn't look that human, there was something about the hands and the shape of the face was a little weird. It lay there, electrical sparks going up and down its body. They found his friend in the rooms above the shop, along with his family. All of them were dead, their bodies ripped apart.

"I'm so sorry." Said Bren. "That thing must have.....We've seen them before."

"We should grab some supplies and head back to the Eleanor." Said Doug. "I know Fadhlan wouldn't have minded us taking what we need."

"Are you sure?" Asked Matt. "A few extra rations would be useful."

"Yeah, I'm sure."

Bren heard the whimpering sound first. They might have shot the poor girl if she hadn't kept so still, until they were almost on top of her. Crushed up among the large bags of rice at the back of the shop, she looked about sixteen or so.

"Are you one of his family?" Asked Doug, in Indonesian. "My friend Fadhlan owned this shop. Do you know him?"

The girl shook her head and looked terrified. She was wearing jeans and a T shirt, which seemed to be the worldwide street uniform for teenagers.

“Ask her what her name is.” Said Bren.

“My name is Elaheh.” She replied, in English. “That thing was chasing me, so I ran in here and hid as best I could.”

So the girl had led the alien creature into his friend’s shop. She might have inadvertently caused the deaths of all those in the Bodega, but he found it impossible to hold it against her. Elaheh was just a scared kid.

“Pontianak is finished Elaheh and nowhere is likely to be safe.” Said Bren. “We have a boat and you’re welcome to come with us.”

“Unless you have a family who are looking for you ?” Asked Doug.

She shook her head in a way that, when added to the look on her face, left him in no doubt her family had gone. It seemed Bren and Matt liked to pick up strays, which he could hardly complain about. He’d been a stray until they’d found him.

“Yes, come with us.” Added Matt. “We’ve no idea what happened here, but devils fighting alien machines doesn’t sound like somewhere any of us should be.”

“The devils kill the aliens, not people.” Said Elaheh. “I saw them, many times.”

“What do they look like, these Devils ?” Asked Doug.

“Monsters, they look like terrible monsters. Do you want to see them ? I know where their Queen is.....She’s taken over one of the large hotels on the east side of town.”

“They have a Queen ? How do you know all this Elaheh ?” Asked Matt.

“I hid there for a while, it felt safe.....I saw her order them about, she must be their Queen.”

“Will you take us there ?” Asked Bren.

Elaheh merely nodded at them.

“Well.....I suppose we have four voting now.” Said Matt. “Who’s for going to see this Queen of the Devils ?”

Everyone put their hand up, including Elaheh.

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Deb had already spoken to Francine Lazan the Base Commander and had received a very curt no. Andy Korenberg was likely to give the same response, but Deb thought she owed it to Iris to explore every avenue, dried up creek, and blind alley if necessary. At least booking a meeting with Andy was easier than getting five minutes with Francine.

“Good morning Deb.”

Said Andy, as he strode into the partitioned off part of the hangar he used as an office three days of the week. No receptionist or secretary, most of those had been moved to shuttle assembly duties. It seemed that even people with no aptitude for the work could be useful, even if just by carrying boxes around.

“Good morning Andy.” She replied.

Andy had a way of looking at people, as if their body language could tell him all he needed to know about them. He’d have a good idea why she was there; she had spoken to a lot of people about the Iris problem. She had delved into an awful lot of blind alleys.

“You’re early Deb. Talk to me while I fill the kettle..... Have you heard from Matt lately ?”

“No, and I probably won’t until he bangs on the front door.”

“Australia to Filey in Yorkshire, during an alien invasion. It’ll be the stuff of legends Deb.”

If he made it of course, though Andy was too polite to mention that. He filled a kettle from a huge plastic container with ‘Drinking Water,’ written on at least half a dozen labels. Someone was

obviously taking no chances with a lot of untrained staff lurking about, in a hangar full of noxious substances.

“Do you fancy a cup of herbal tea Deb ? Our own of course, the best Filey Camomile.”

“Yeah, alright....Live dangerously is my moto.”

The kettle plugged into a socket near his desk, so she didn't wait for an invite to sit the other side of the fold up table he was using to work on. It all seemed a bit unglamorous for a guy building a fleet of space arks to save mankind.

“There you go..... Let it settle a bit before drinking it.”

“Thanks Andy.”

He took a writing pad out a pod of drawers and a pen. Andy held the pen and looked at her, his way of saying ‘alright, I'm ready, get on with it.’

“I came to talk to you about Iris.” She said.

“I guessed you had, but Francine has the last word on such matters.”

“It seems so unfair to deny her a place on the shuttle, just because she's getting on a bit.”

Deb knew that eighty eight was well beyond what anyone would call merely getting on a bit, but she was desperate to portray Iris as a victim of ageism. If she could make it look like a case of prejudice against a grumpy gran, she might stand a chance.

“Everyone loves Iris Deb. She is eighty eight though and one of the few people on campus excused from having work duties assigned to them. By the time the fleet is ready to leave, she'll be ninety. The extreme gravitational forces on take-off could kill her. And the chances of her surviving to see a new world.....It doesn't make sense to take her. We are denying people a place who are far younger and more likely to survive the trip.”

“I know Andy and if I was on that side of the desk, I'd be saying the same things. It's obvious Iris is too old, it makes sense to leave her behind. It's just that it's Iris.....Iris Andy. There has to be a way. I was given a place for Matt. Supposing he doesn't make it here ?”

“No, it doesn't work like that. You'd be asked to pick someone else who meets the health and fitness criteria to travel. Inka and her children only got places because everyone likes them. Do you want me to bump one of her kids so Iris can go ?”

“No, of course not.....But it's Iris !”

Andy was leaning back in his seat, giving her the meeting over look. It was going to be another blind alley of an idea, another waste of time. At least she'd tried though, she owed Iris that much.

“There is one way of getting Iris a place, but I never suggested it.” Said Andy.

“Fine, I'll try anything.”

“Ishmael and Pandora have a huge amount of clout, but rarely use it. Yes, they fight for resources, but they could ask for a lot of personal comforts and privileges, if they chose to. I'm sure the Malovics were only given places on the shuttles, because they're seen with those two so often. If you can get them to ask Francine for a place for Iris, I'd say you stand a very good chance.”

“Thanks Andy, I'll try that.”

“Sorry, but it has to be said....You might go through all this, only to lose Iris before we leave. As you said, she is getting on a bit.”

“I know.”

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Pandora Gray was happy and very busy. A few ideas using hot metal catalysts were proving good at removing the green death pathogen from the air. They were likely to end up with something like the

catalytic converters used on old fossil fuel cars, rather than a piece of high tech medical chemistry. No one would care though, as long as it worked.

“The last analysis showed a toxin removal of seventy percent.” Said Áslaug Kárason.

As there would hopefully never be a need for a full time pathologist, Dora was keeping Áslaug busy, very busy. The new member of the team still didn't smile that much, but she was beginning to moan a lot less.

“That will do, I'll pass the specifications to the team building the filters.” Said Dora. “If we find something that gives a better removal rate, they can be modified in situ.”

It was wonderful, seventy five percent would have been better. Actually a hundred percent would have been perfect, but that might take longer than the two year window they had to work with. Install the filters and they'd have enough time to finish the fleet. She wrote a quick message to Andy, which as usual, was a request for more resources.

‘Andy – The filter works, have sent specs to the build team. We will need more palladium though. Can you send the scavengers out to find some please – Dora.’

Palladium, an element with atomic number 46 and the symbol Pd. A rare metal that for some reason was the best hot catalyst they'd found to stop the Green Death. Horace had been given a periodic table of the elements and unsurprisingly elements were the same everywhere in the universe. It had taken all day to understand she meant palladium, and there had been a bit of serendipity learning. It seemed that although silicon was the most abundant nongaseous element on Earth, it was slightly behind aluminium on Horace's home world. Palladium; a very rare metal, but Andy would know where to send the scavengers to find more or it. The internal phone rang, showing her the call was from the pens.

“Hi Ish....We did it....A reliable and replicable seventy percent reduction.”

“Well done, have you got a spare minute ?”

“Not really.”

“I have film of Horace doing something amazing.”

“I'm on my way.”

There was a mix of chemicals to go with the catalyst and Áslaug could be left to play around with the mix on her own. With luck they might gain an extra percent or two, but it would just be fine tuning.

“Try the lithium based second platter again Áslaug, I'll be back soon.”

A rainy day, so Dora used the utility tunnels. A longer journey, with a few rat dropping to hint at the growing vermin problem, but at least she was dry. The Malovic kids were there of course, stroking Horace as though she was a pet.

“Horace picked up a wrench.” Said Kata.

“Wow.” Said Dora.

Was that good, an alien grabbing a wrench. Dora didn't have quite the same idea of a cute and loveable Horace as the kids. She'd never want to harm their guest alien, but she never lost sight of the fact that Horace was part of the occupying forces.

“I accidentally left the recorders on all night.” Said Ish. “Look what happened last night, when we were all snug in our beds.”

The recording showed the time as about three thirty in the morning. The kids whooped with delight as two buds of flesh seemed to grow out of Horace's sides.

“Just like the link the original Horace used to touch me.” Said Ish. “Must be some sort of multiple use appendages. I did wonder how a high tech civilisation had developed with no arms.”

A highly intelligent creature who looked like a huge grub crossed with a maggot. Dora had wondered how it used tools herself. One thing had stuck with her from an anthropology module at college, all intelligent creatures use tools.

"They're like hands." Said Kata.

The buds of flesh grew at an immense speed, to become two arms that were closer to octopus tentacles than human arms. Dora had seen the original Horace put out very fine and small feelers to examine its food, but these were appendages with three fingered hands on the end. Horace opened a drawer on the table and took out a large heavy wrench.

"Oh.....Ish, that isn't good." Said Dora. "She was obviously hiding this from us."

"But she's so clever." Said Kata.

Ish paused the recording.

"Time to find yellow objects Kata." Said Ish. "Take Antun with you...Same as before a backpack full of small yellow objects. I'll think of a nice treat if you come back with a good variety."

Poor Kata knew she was being got rid of for a while, it was written all over her face. She went though, taking her brother with her.

"It gets worse, watch this bit." Said Ish.

Horace took several tools out of the drawer and experimented with each, before putting them back in the drawer. By the time the recording said it was four in the morning, there was just a flashlight left, which she'd managed to drop on the floor.

"The flashlight was in the drawer this morning Biff.....Watch really carefully."

It looked like magic, the way the flashlight was on the floor one moment and on the table the next. Dora gasped at the implications.

"She must be using telekinesis." She said.

"I thought that until I slowed the recording right down. Still too fast to see clearly, but our Horace can send out something that resembles a chameleon's tongue. It came out of its side, just above one of the arms. So fast, the AI said it travelled at half the speed of a bullet."

"Fuck Ish, we need to remove anything she might grab as a weapon."

"Do we Biff, really ? I'm assuming our first Horace had the same skills, yet he never tried to hurt us."

"So what do we do ? We can't just ignore it."

"Not today, I'll find Inka's kids a job that'll take them all day tomorrow. Then we'll have a long talk with Horace, her English is now better than some of the post grad students'. We can show her the recording and ask her about it. We can also ask her about a proper antidote to the Green Death."

"She'll think we're spying on her." Said Dora.

"Horace is an enemy prisoner....I think we're entitled to spy on her."

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Like just about everywhere, the town of Combe Martin hadn't escaped the invasion unscathed. Steve Penboss could see a church steeple and a row of undamaged houses, but everything else was rubble. A service station looked to have once been at the centre of a huge explosion and subsequent fire. All of it had happened a while ago though; the ash was beginning to be taken over by fireweed. "Looks like they've taken over the old holiday park." He said to Daisy. "A caravan site really and a bit of a dump from what I remember."

The helicopter circled the beach, going right out over the ocean, before coming in to land near the caravans.

"We're there, get your stuff together."

They'd picked up a few other families on the way and a couple of loners who, like him, had decided to wait out the troubles in an isolated cottage. Like him, they had miscalculated how far the aliens would go to blot out mankind.

"Get you backpack Maria." Said Alejandro.

"Someone help me up.....Oh, this is so undignified." Said Jada.

Luis could have probably got his wife up onto her feet on his own, but Steve helped. The wave of fresh air after the door was opened was welcome, there were a lot of people in the helicopter and wars wreak havoc with personal hygiene rituals.

"Everyone out, you'll be assigned accommodation."

Probably a caravan, but anything was going to be better than the ruin of an old mansion, where the roof let in the rain.

"Here....Let me carry your bag Jada." Said Daisy.

There was still a little rain falling, a lazy drizzle that seemed intent on soaking them and their bags. Two men in uniform approached them. Not homemade uniforms, but they looked to have been repurposed at some point. Someone was good with a needle and thread though, the home embroidered 'Kingdom of Devon and Cornwall,' looked very smart. So, the local government had decided to become a local kingdom. Steve wasn't sure if that was a good thing, or something to worry about.

"I'm Commander Archer, currently assigned to running the Combe Martin operation."

His navy blue uniform looked smart, probably an old British Navy uniform that someone had lovingly altered to fit him perfectly. Commander Archer looked to be in his late fifties, with short dark hair mixed with quite a bit of grey.

"You will be assigned a caravan to live in, but you won't be here for long. Please accept that the accommodation might be a bit cramped. You will all soon be leaving for Jersey."

"How long until we go to Jersey?" Asked Jessica Chase.

"That depends on the weather. Our boats are currently waiting in St Aubin for a storm to pass."

Going by boat made sense, the helicopter they'd arrived on was a museum piece and probably used aviation fuel at a prodigious rate. The others in their group seemed surprised to be travelling by boat though. Commander Archer used the age old trick of ignoring questions from the crowd, until they'd run out of things to say.

"There will be a meal served tonight." He said. "We're quite proud of our food....Someone will let you know when to come to the main building."

With that he left, without answering a single question.

"He reminds me of the guy who ran Bruce Grove Radio." Said Steve. "He was a bit of a dick too."

"I don't care....A roof over our heads that doesn't leak." Said Luis. "I already love it here."

"And they're going to feed us....A cooked meal." Said Alejandro. "I can't remember the last decent cooked meal I had."

"Hey, I cooked that rabbit you caught." Said Jada.

The arrival of a young girl in uniform stopped any further Lopez family bickering. It seemed the new Kingdom of Devon and Cornwall considered any uniform to be better than no uniform. The girl was wearing a grey uniform, that once again, someone had repurposed with some skill. A nice smile, though she didn't introduce herself.

"As you're a large family group.....I'm going to assign you one of the bigger mobile homes."

"Thank you." Said Jada.

A mark on a clipboard and they were off, following the girl across the large holiday park. No one was cutting the grass, though constant trudging by many feet had created paths, damp muddy paths.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm quite looking forward to a night in a nice dry caravan." Said Tracy.

"So.....The government of Devon and Cornwall decided to become a full blown kingdom." Steve said to the girl.

"It seemed the appropriate thing to do."

She wasn't happy anymore, no smile or even eye contact. Daisy was nudging his arm and hissing at him to shut up. Of course, that just made him more determined to continue.

"Will we meet the King ? Is he in Jersey ?"

"All your questions will be answered once you reach Jersey.....Ahh, here we are. No keys I'm afraid, but we haven't had any serious incidents of theft. Someone will bang on the door when we're serving the evening meal."

No more happy smiling face, she left without saying another word. Steve didn't like the comment about no serious incidents, it tended to mean they were treating every incident as a minor one.

"I think we need to find a way of jamming the door shut at night." Said Steve.

"You're such a cynic." Said Alejandro.

"No, just a realist."

Someone had named the large cabin on wheels, probably the once proud owner of the impressive home away from home. 'Pont-Combe,' said the nameplate on the door, which led straight into a large lounge with two comfortable sofas.

"Ok, I take it all back, every negative thought." Said Steve. "I love the place."

The signs started though, written in crayon and stuck everywhere with bits of tape.

'The gas bottle is empty. Do what you need to do before dark.'

'Take a flashlight when you go to the dining hall, the outside lights are broken.'

'The water in the barrel outside can be drunk.'

It went on and on, but at least whoever had note leaving diarrhoea, was trying to make sure they were well informed.

"We've got a proper toilet." Said Maria, with unhidden glee.

There was a note on the door of course, saying maintaining the chemical toilet was their responsibility, whatever that meant. But having a clean sit down toilet seemed like a little bit of heaven to everyone.

"I bet the accommodation in Jersey is even nicer." Said Tracy. "It makes sense really.....If this is what you get as a temporary place to live."

"Yes, I'm hoping we get a nice house." Said Jada.

Steve wasn't sharing the euphoria, though he was going to smile and keep his thoughts to himself. Home altered uniforms and a base commander who wasn't keen on answering questions. Add on the government who had now decided to be a full blown Kingdom. What next, the West Country Empire. Steve would have taken his bag and run, dragging Daisy with him. There was nowhere else to go though, the condition of those the helicopter had picked up had convinced him of that. It was hell out there, beyond the boundary fence, and likely to get a lot worse.

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"We should be safe now, the alien creatures avoid the devils." Said Elaheh.

Matt Newman was worried about the nearby bomb crater. Not that huge, but it meant the aliens weren't just relying on ground forces to destroy the city.

“How far is it to the hotel ?” He asked.

“Not far, you’ll see.....Not far now.”

She’d been saying that for a while and Doug had said there were a few hotels matching her description, all at least a mile from the city centre. Bren stumbled over yet another pile of concrete that had probably been someone’s home or place of business. Giving her a chance to get her boots off to see if she’d hurt her foot, meant a quick break for all of them. Of course he helped her.

“Ow....Oh.... I know I’m being a baby.” She said.

“Not a bit of it, there’s some swelling.” He said. “Nothing broken though.”

Elaheh hadn’t learned from her bad experience in the Bodega. She vanished without saying a word, to return after about ten minutes, carrying a bag full of drinks and junk food.

“Thank you, but you shouldn’t go alone.” Said Matt. “It isn’t safe.”

“But I told you, the aliens are scared of the devils. We’re safe this close to the hotel.”

She probably meant it, but she’d been saying they were close to the hotel since they’d walked past the ruins of Landak Bridge.

“Ask before you go anywhere Elaheh.” Said Bren.

“I will, sorry.”

It seemed crisps and brightly coloured junk food tasted just as bad in Indonesia, as it did back home in Britain. Some of the drinks were quite refreshing though, even if they were far too warm. Eventually Bren managed to get her injured foot back inside her boot. After a section of fairly intact road, their guide pointed at a tall building the other side of a small park.

“There it is.....The Queen of the Devils is in there.”

“That’s a government building, not a hotel.” Said Doug.

“She’s in there.” Said Elaheh.

It was one of those moments he hated, where everyone was looking at him for some sort of decision.

“We did come here to take a look at her, this queen.” He said. “Is there a back way in Elaheh ?”

“Yes, the way I sneaked out without being seen.....This way.”

The tall government building looked fairly undamaged from the front, just the usual shattered windows and scorch marks. The rear had gone though, all twenty floors or so had collapsed into the street. Elaheh clambered up the rubble like a mountain goat, with them trying to keep up with her. He only tried to talk to her once.

“Shush....We’re very close to her now Matt.”

Through a ruined set of rooms, where every footstep seemed to make some sort of scratching noise in the dust and general detritus. All the time the girl was shushing at them as though they were idiots. She was shushing him, a full trained special operations soldier. It was alright for her, she probably weighed next to nothing. When Elaheh stopped next to a collapsed set of stairs, he knew things were getting serious. ‘Here,’ she was mouthing, while pointing at something he couldn’t see. The creature at the bottom of the crater was yelling at one of the devils, her minions.

“No Einer.....We’re not leaving until it is found.”

A weird voice that didn’t sound even slightly human, but the words.....The words were English.

“Crap ! It talks English.” Muttered Doug.

It did and its hearing was pretty good too. A long arm with a claw at the end pointed at them, as the creature began to scream orders at her minions.

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