

Ishmael

Chapter 17 - Sylvie

“Staverton had looked so quiet, so safe. The St Paul de Leon Church had looked almost inviting; they’d even found an open door. Maybe it had been the solid stone walls that had drawn them to the old church, or perhaps it had been because a church meant sanctuary.”



Sylvie Barachin had total control of Mordor One, though it had come at a price. At one time the communal lounge had been a busy place, the chairs occupied by a variety of students and staff with a multitude of skills. Now she looked at a small group who barely filled the seating closest to her. Over half the students from Albion had gone back to Earth on the shuttle from Mordor Two. There had been losses in the fight with Richard and Pam and they’d forced some of her loyal supporters to go with them. Sylvie counted just eleven heads and only three of them excelled in their chosen fields. She’d already talked to everyone individually the night before, she knew the general mood. A vote had to be avoided though, that would make her look weak.

“We can agree on all sorts of ambitious plans, but it all comes down to one thing.” She said. “Paul, can you get the remaining shuttle to obey our commands ?”

Paul was a theoretical physics student with useful tech skills. Nowhere near as good as Norma, but according to the goodbye data burst from Pam, she was now dead. Like everyone Paul carried his MAG74 everywhere, even into the bathroom. The fight with Pam and Richard had left everyone feeling tense and anxious. Paul was sighing at her, something he did quite often.

“Yes, by effectively lobotomising the onboard AI.” Said Paul. “Something Norma and MacLaren were loath to do and MacLaren was a far better shuttle pilot than any of us. Easy to disconnect the AI and fly the shuttle manually, but what if something unexpected happens ? What if the Mordor Two defence systems try to talk to our shuttle and realises it’s brain dead ?”

“But you can do it ?” Persisted Sylvie.

“Yes I can, though I wouldn’t advise it.”

“What about the warning of an infection ?” Someone asked. “We’ve all heard the recordings, it sounds genuine.”

“I tend to agree.” Said Herman. “It was pretty decent of MacLaren to include us in her data burst. It has Fifth West data that looks genuine and this..... Compromised DNA infection sounds like something to avoid. We have enough food and water here to last for decades.”

Herman was a student under a scheme with the British Navy, she’d made a point of reading everyone’s file. Not the sort to side with the rebellion, but she trusted his loyalty. He wasn’t receiving applause though, the general mood was for moving to Mordor Two. A much larger facility with more food and water and best of all, advanced weapons. She’d never give them a vote on it, but a sensible leader always tries to go with the flow.

“You know my feelings on this.” She said. “The infection warning was fake, designed to stop us moving to Mordor Two.”

“But why would they do that ?” Asked Herman. “What’s in it for them ?”

“They hate us.” Someone yelled.

Sylvie missed Theo, he was better at handling the crowd than her. She looked at the remaining male students and looked at the two she hadn’t already mentally rejected. Herman was the best, though

choosing him wouldn't be a popular choice. She had needs though, fairly soon she'd need to decide who was going to replace Theo in her bed.

"Pam doesn't want us getting the weapons." Said Cassie.

Well done Cassie, the weapons idea was generally popular, she was even given a little applause.

Cassie was their Valkyrie, a tall muscular student from the Midlands. Cassie was all for the move to Mordor Two. She was also their sole surviving student with any skills in botany.

"Can I be brutally honest?" Asked Herman.

"When aren't you?" Someone muttered.

The crowd might be small, but they were against him. Herman had something to say though and Sylvie knew he'd say it. In many ways he'd make the perfect partner for her.

"We're well below a viable population number." He said. "I'm the only person who can get our IT systems to behave and Cassie is our only botanist."

"Your point is?" Someone shouted.

"Let him speak." Snapped Sylvie.

"We have intelligent medical bots, but if anything really bad should happen.....We have no trained medical staff." Said Herman. "What I'm trying to say is that if just two of us are killed in this adventure.....That could be the end of our group."

He was right, but Sylvie wasn't about to tell them. She'd discussed the plan with Cassie and it was a safe plan, a plan designed to put none of them at needless risk.

"I have made my decision." Said Sylvie.

She stood up, it meant they'd all be looking up at her.

"We will be leaving here and taking over Mordor Two."

They were cheering her. Not all of them, but most of them.

"I am aware of the dangers and we will be keeping our suits on until the contaminated area is sealed off from the rest of the base." She said. "Diagnostics will be run on the air and water. If any infection is found we come back here, no argument. If the results are clear.....Mordor Two will be our new home."

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Staverton had looked so quiet, so safe. The St Paul de Leon Church had looked almost inviting; they'd even found an open door. Maybe it had been the solid stone walls that had drawn them to the old church, or perhaps it had been because a church meant sanctuary. For whatever the reason, they'd decided to stay there for a few days and look for food in the area. Luis had decided to try searching near Staverton Station. As for Valentina? She'd done remarkably well to walk all the way from Torquay, but she needed a few day's rest. They'd left her asleep on a sofa in the vestry.

"Food..... In a one dog village like this." She muttered.

Jada Lopez wasn't carrying an empty bag, there had been a few things left in the already looted village shop. A little bottled water and a few packets of stale biscuits. She had found some proper food that morning, three tins of vegetable soup. Those she'd found in a room at the back of the village hall. Probably part of a collection for the hungry, though Jada felt no guilt at adding them to the contents of her bag.

"We're hungry now."

There seemed to be two rules to the game now the world appeared to be ending. Stay out in the safety of the countryside and starve, or stay near the large towns and get killed by the aliens. The threat from hungry, half crazy people was a risk anywhere; they'd come across quite a few of those. The rifle had worked, even without them actually having to fire it. Luis had become very good at

pointing it at people and shouting obscenities. So far at least, that had discouraged the crazies, though Jada wondered if they'd become a little crazy too. She pushed open the heavy oak church door and stepped inside.

"We've got food that isn't junk food for tonight Valentina." She shouted. "Vegetable soup, enough to fill us up.....And I found some....."

The scene was enough to make her grab hold of the rifle, which had been hanging from its strap over her shoulder. Luis had insisted that she should take the rifle for her protection. Jada aimed the rifle at the man, though he looked barely old enough to be called a man. They both looked so young.....

"We didn't mean to hurt her." Said the woman. "We just wanted something to eat..... She attacked us."

Valentina was lying motionless on the floor, a little blood on the ground near her head. Jada released the safety catch and aimed the rifle at the man's head. She must have appeared more confident than she felt, the man looked nervous.

"Easy..... Easy..... It's all a misunderstanding." He said.

"She could barely walk, much less attack you." Said Jada. "Is she alright?"

They both looked so nice, so ordinary. Two young kids really, no older than nineteen or twenty. Clean clothes, a friendly smile. Clean cut was the expression her father would have used to describe them. The woman felt Valentina's face and then her neck.

"She's fine, Wayne didn't hit her that hard."

"I didn't want to hurt her." Said Wayne. "She came at me like a wild thing out of nowhere. Look at my arm, she scratched me."

The woman was lying, Jada had become used to seeing death, far too used to it. The way Valentina's head had fallen back on the floor, her lack of reaction to being touched. She was probably dead, or at least badly injured.

"Drop our food and walk away from her." Said Jada.

They'd taken everything, every scrap of food and water. Wayne upended their sack, dropping everything next to Valentina. There was more than their food in the pile, a few tins Jada didn't recognise. When you're short of food you know what you have, every tin so precious it was almost named. They hadn't acted on impulse, they'd robbed other people.

"Further back, get right away from her." Yelled Jada.

They moved, all the time exchanging looks. The clean cut mask dropped away when they exchanged looks.

"Faster, up against the window.... I mean it. I want you backsides pressing against the wall."

They moved fairly quickly, pushing themselves against the wall. Jada had a little arthritis that hadn't been improved by living rough for so long. She groaned as she knelt next to her husband's mother.

There was no pulse in her neck, no sign of her breathing.

"It was an accident." Said Wayne. "Are you on your own now?"

"I'm Chris, we could help you." Said the woman.

Another look between them and Jada made a decision. She didn't want them going away, just to return with knives in the early hours of the morning. She didn't want to even engage with them, she definitely hadn't wanted to know their names.

"You killed a harmless old lady." She said.

"We never meant to." Said Chris.

She only had three bullets, there could be no question of just wounding him. Jada aimed at the centre of Wayne's face, right at the middle of his nose. The bang of the rifle was deafening in the

enclosed space, though she heard Chris scream. Wayne fell to the floor, though his blood still covered the inside of the vestry window. So much blood.....

“No !..... It was an accident.” Yelled Chris.

The woman was walking towards her and she now had a blood stained knife in her right hand. Valentina didn't appear to have been stabbed, it seemed Wayne and Chris had visited other people that day. Jada fired the rifle again. Her aim was a little off, the bullet hit Chris in the chin and took off the back of her head as it came out. More blood on the vestry window. So much that the light in the room became tinged with red.

“Oh..... Fuck.” Said Jada.

Just one precious bullet left for the rifle, she put it down carefully on a chair. Her hip complained about getting down on the ground twice in a day, but she had to check that Valentina was definitely dead. Jada found herself crying, despite the fact that the old lady had made her life a living hell at times.

No pulse, she did check in several different places. No breath either and Valentina's skin was beginning to cool. Her husband's mother was dead, she wondered how he was going to take it.

“She'll need burying of course.” She muttered. “Not these two though, they can rot where they fell.”

Luis prided himself on being active for his age. That didn't mean Jada would expect him to tire himself out digging graves for animals. Luis returned an hour later, shouting out as he came through the door.

“I found a store room at the station.” He yelled. “Junk food, but lots of it.... And some cola. So much it'll take a few trips to.....”

Jada didn't know what to say, she didn't have the words to describe something so immense. She let him look around for a few seconds, taking in the dead body of his mother and the others, the dead animals.

“They came to steal our food.” She said. “I think Valentina fought them.... They killed her.”

“So you killed them ?”

“Yes I did..... There's only one bullet left now.”

Her husband and father of her children collapsed to the ground and began to cry. Getting down on the floor three times in a day would be painful, but it was necessary. She hugged her husband until he calmed down a little.

“We can't stay here now.” She said. “Did the station look safe ? Had lots of looters been there ?”

“No..... We'll need to bury my mother.”

“I know, there's a proper graveyard outside..... Quite pretty.”

“Are we burying the others ?”

“No, not them.”

“Good.”

“We'll bury Valentina and say her a few words over her.” Said Jada. “Then we'll take all our things and move to the station, at least for a while.”

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There were no blueprints for the alien tower, no plans lodged with the local authority. The best place to plant explosives was up to him and Matt Newman was winging it a little.

“The transmitter must be at the top..... Agreed ?” He'd asked Bren.

He wasn't sure why he'd asked Bren, it was hardly something she'd have known any more about than him. It had still been reassuring though, when she'd nodded her head.

“That makes sense.....They'd want the jamming signal to spread for miles.” She'd said.

“Yeah..... Best range if it’s at the top.” Duncan had agreed.

There’d be a huge transmitter with a way to link it to an antenna right at the top. These were aliens though, everything might be arse about face. For all he knew they’d walked past a room holding the transmitter on the 3rd or 4th floor. There was a plan B if there was no obvious transmitter, a plan everyone knew.

“We’ll get as high up the tower as we can reach. Set every explosive charge we have and then get out of the tower before they go off.” He’d told them.

Of course getting out of the tower might not be that easy, especially trying to get out in a hurry. They’d been attacked by the small alien creatures on the way up, there’d even been a few flying drones in the larger rooms. Their weapons worked well, but they’d been taken by surprise by an enemy who knew the tower better than them. Matt had lost another two men and their force hadn’t been huge to begin with. For fighters already grieving the loss of Chris Crawford, the extra deaths had been devastating. All his men were on edge, ducking from enemies who weren’t there. “What the hell is that ?”

Matt came up the ramp a little behind the main group of his men. It was a large open area, the sort of space where flying drones had attacked them. All Matt had time for was the cabinets on the far side of the room. No flashing lights, just the sound of a loud electrical hum.

“That’s it..... We’ve found the transmitter.” He said.

If it wasn’t, it would have to do. About three floors from the top and it was the closest thing to looking like electronics they’d seen. His men were more interested in the creature who looked to be operating the equipment.

“Christ, it stinks.” Said Duncan.

“Maybe it’s dead.” Suggested Bren. “Nothing alive should stink like that.”

A foul smell, like a mixture of the stench of death and backed up drains. The creature was about ten feet long, with lots of tiny legs. Disturbingly it was attached to several metallic spheres by pipes and tubes. One thing it wasn’t, was yet another robot. Matt was sure the creature was one of them, a living alien.

“Take it easy guys.” He said. “Don’t shoot unless it attacks.”

“If we take it alive, we’d never get it down all those ramps.” Said Bren.

Owen wasn’t helping, he was waving his arms about and shouting out some sort of aboriginal ritual.

“He’s warding off all the bad mojo.” Said Duncan.

The creature was moving about, but not doing anything threatening. The problem arrived with Owen, the alien obviously wasn’t keen on him dancing about and shouting. Its skin rippled and it emitted a sound like a million Cicadas on heat. That was enough for soldiers who’d already been tense for far too long. At first one fired, then another.....

“No..... Stop !” Shouted Matt. “Cease fire !..... That’s an order..... Stop shooting.”

The creature was dead, lying on its side, motionless. One of the spheres had been broken open. A heavy green gas was coming out of the sphere.

“Get back, that might be poisonous.” Shouted Bren.

As a mass, they moved back towards the ramp, giving the gas time to dissipate. Matt didn’t want to read his men the riot act, they’d acted purely out of instinct. The same instincts that kept good soldiers alive. He had Bren to mutter at.

“I’m sure that was one of them.” He said. “Just think what we might have learned.”

“It would never have survived to reach a lab.” Said Bren.

She was right of course. At least he had someone to get angry with. Owen was still dancing about and reciting his nonsense.

“That’s quite enough of that Owen.” He shouted.

Matt was sure an opportunity to learn more about the aliens had been lost and he hated lost opportunities. There was nothing to be done about it though, other than setting the charges.

“Bren, take pictures of everything as they set the charges.” He said.

“Duncan, use half of the explosives up against the cabinets. The rest needs to be spread around the outside walls. With luck we might bring down the top of the tower.”

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Zane Bates quite enjoyed filling up the supermarket trolley with groceries, before wheeling it back to the house. He liked the rattling noise the wheels made as they hit uneven bits of the road. Best of all was knowing they wouldn’t have to worry about being hungry for a very long time. Hunger hadn’t meant much to him when there were rows of fast food shops in the High Road. Now he’d known hunger, it had meaning. He whistled to himself as the trolley crashed up onto the pavement near the house they now thought of as theirs.

“Crap !” He muttered.

He hadn’t been paying attention. That was the problem when an enemy rarely seemed to pose a threat and turned up unexpectedly. Zane froze as the drone hovered about twenty feet above him. There were a few trees and bushes, though none were directly between him and them. If they thought he was worth zapping, he’d soon be dead. His hands began to tremble.

“Not now, I can’t die at fifteen.” He muttered.

The entire Bates family had become good at playing statues. Actually they were exceptionally good at it, mainly because standing still kept you alive if alien drones were patrolling the area. Zane had seen a woman killed by laser fire from a drone, it looked a nasty way to die. He kept still until he heard a slight electrical crackle as the drone flew away.

“I will be more alert..... Crap, I will be more alert.” He muttered.

He caught up with his sister Tirsia, who was still standing still, looking up at the sky. She too had a trolley filled with a treasure trove of food and essentials. Being Tirsia, she had previously brought back quite a lot of hair care products, until dad had told her tinned food was more essential than conditioner.

“They flew south..... Shit, that was too close.” She said.

“We mustn’t tell mum.” He said. “We’ll never be allowed out of the house again.... Or at least not for months.”

“I’m not sure..... I don’t like keeping things from them.” Said Tirsia.

“You mean things like you making out with Kylie’s brother last Christmas ?”

That’s what made having a big sister fun. She’d just nearly been zapped by an alien drone, but she was going pale at the thought of their mum knowing she’d had a snog and a grope with a guy in his mid-twenties.

“How do you know ?” She asked him.

“Kylie told me, she thought it was gross.”

“Oh no, does everyone know ?”

Her poor face..... Zane decided she’d been teased enough. Besides, things were different now. He’d mentally moved her out of the annoying big sister category and into being an accomplice in things their parents might not like.

“Does it really matter if they do ?” He asked. “We’re probably never going back to Tottenham.”

"I suppose not."

"Look.... Don't tell mum about the drones and we can get another load of stuff this afternoon."

She was still looking up, as though the aliens might come back. They never had before though, one pass and gone for days had been their usual routine.

"I'm not sure if I can go out again..... Not today." Said Tirsia.

"Oh come on, we can get stuff for ourselves, we've earned it. Wouldn't you like to put a few things you want in the trolley."

"Dad will moan again."

"Then let him moan..... We'll still have a few nice things. You mustn't tell mum about the drones, or there will no more nice things."

"Alright."

Zane rolled his trolley into an empty ground floor room they were using as a store. Their mum greeted them like hunters returning with a deer slung over their shoulders.

"Wonderful, we all love the tinned beef pies." Said his mum. "Did you have any problems?"

"No." Said Zane.

He held his breath, as he waited for Tirsia to speak. His big sister was a girl after all and by definition, unpredictable.

"None at all mum, we can do another run today." Said Tirsia.

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The Military Intelligence base in Kidderminster had been evacuated, deserted apart from a family of foxes, who'd come begging for food on their first night there. There had been a fully staffed laboratory in the underground section of the base, all the information JV had sent them confirmed it. There'd also been soldiers to guard the base and deter casual nosiness from the general public. They'd all packed up and gone, leaving no clue to their current whereabouts. At least the previous occupants had locked the outside doors, though it had taken three hours for the Fifth West team to break in.

"We've a working laboratory, a generator and several rooms full of food." Biff had said. "I'd prefer not to know quite so much about Jenkins, but on the whole..... I think we've landed on our feet."

Corporal Jenkins, to give him his full title, obviously hadn't been popular. Or of course he might have been a fiction invented by bored soldiers. Nearly every wall had a note about his dubious parentage, sexual deviancy, or lack of intelligence.

'Jenkins is a wanker,' was on the wall of the bedroom they'd claimed.

Ishmael McGrath was currently looking at the words, while he finished dressing. Sadly he thought Horace, their captive alien, was going to die that day.

"I had such high hopes when we arrived here." He said.

"But we've achieved so much Ish." Said Biff. "Or rather you have, with your mental link with Horace. We know he's a conscript, no happier to be here than we are to have him here. It's a pity we don't know his name, but there are limitation when trying to communicate without having a common language."

"I pick up a sense of two genders, with Horace being male." He said. "As for a name.....No matter how hard I try, there's just the impression of a strong wind and the top of a valley. I guess he'll always be just Horace to us."

"Typical." Said Biff. "Men named after strong winds and I bet the women there are named after pretty flowers and shrubs."

"Don't knock it Biff....Better than being named after a long dead fictional whaler."

"I've got everything. Are you ready for today?" Biff asked.

Was he? Ish was dreading it, but there was no avoiding it.

"Not really..... Is it wrong to be sad he's dying?"

"No..... Come on, we'd better go."

Much to the annoyance of their military protectors, they'd claimed a room in one of the surface buildings. It meant a walk through a small group of trees and across a grassy area. They both looked forward to that walk. Some days the fox cubs were still playing out on the grass, barely reacting to their presence. Once through the outer door to the research bunker, things were different.

"I used to yearn to have electric lights again." Said Biff. "Now I wish we'd left him in one of the surface buildings."

"JV would have just overruled us." Said Ish.

"Do you think JV will let us bury him outside?" She asked.

It was the start of a conversation they'd had several times since realising Horace was unwell. For some reason it was a topic they both needed to keep revisiting.

"We both know he'll want Horace dissected and studied." Said Ish. "We'll need to do it, or he'll just send someone in a helicopter to take away the body."

Ish held Biff's hand.

"We agreed to do it." He said. "You said it was better if we did it..... Than a stranger."

"I know.....Yes, we'll cut up Horace."

She rushed off, as though it was all his fault. Horace was in a large lab three floors down. They tended to go down by the stairs in the morning and use the elevator to come up again at the end of the day.

"Biff..... Stop."

No good, she hurtled down the first flight of steps and vanished. He caught up with her at the doors to their laboratory. Inka Malovic was already waiting there with her children. The Malovic children had become quite fond of the strange alien who made weird sounds and sometimes emitted a nasty smell. Inka didn't share their affection for Horace.

"I can see it in your faces, you're sad the thing is dying." Said Inka. "My Kata was up all night crying and Antun was little better. It's a monster, our enemy. This is one of the things who sent the robots to kill my neighbours."

"Probably not him personally." Said Biff. "He's a conscript Inka, he doesn't want to be here."

"Only obeying orders I suppose..... Now where did I hear that before?"

"He knew if he was part of the first wave he'd die." Said Ish. "Or at least there was a good chance he'd die. He was right and it looks likely he'll die today."

"Don't expect sympathy from me for your creature." Said Inka. "I'd like to see them all die, every single one of them."

Ish could sympathise with her and on some level he felt jealous of her black and white view of the situation. She hadn't linked with Horace though, or felt his pain. Biff unlocked their lab.

"You're welcome inside." She said. "But you might have to leave quickly. We're not sure what changes might occur when Horace dies."

The children were through the door in an instant, running over to see Horace. Kata simply sat and stroked Horace for hours, as though he was a sick puppy. At first Ish had worried about the kids picking up an alien infection. He now thought that was unlikely and he was certain Horace would never knowingly hurt the Malovic kids.

"Oh, poor Horace." Said Antun.

Inka just sighed and sat in the same chair she usually used. Where would Inka and her children end up after Horace died ? Ish was determined to return to London if he could, even if it meant being in the worst of the fighting. Biff wanted to go to, but they could hardly take the Malovics with them.

“Can’t you fix him ?” Asked Antun.

“No..... Believe me, we’ve tried.” Said Biff.

They’d learned so much from Horace, all of it without knowing a word of each other’s languages. It tended to happen at night, perhaps Horace needed to be resting ? The fleshy finger would appear to come from inside the alien creature, gently touching Ish’s neck or bare arm. Instantly Ish was there, in the mind of the creature, seeing the world through his eyes. Mainly memories of Horace’s home world, but sometimes they were memories of planning the invasion of Earth. It had been planned for centuries, a vast plan carried over from one generation to another.

Why were the creatures leaving their own planet ? No matter how hard Ish looked at the memories Horace fed him, the reason for taking over Earth was never clear. Some sort of approaching cataclysm left a dark thread through the mind of the alien. Like so much else.... Without words, without a common language....Ish just knew the aliens meant to wipe out mankind and make the Earth their own. There were emotions in Horace’s mind that could be construed as sympathy for the intended fate of the human race, but no feelings of regret. He was an alien, his thoughts were often strange to Ish, sometimes terrifying.

“It’s empty.” Said Biff. “Whatever was in here was essential to him, I’m sure of it.”

She was looking at a gauge attached to the outside of the largest sphere connected to Horace.

They’d adapted the gauge from a device designed to measure the contents of oxygen cylinders. All of his spheres now had gauges on the outside and the contents of most had been static since they’d begun to feed Horace and provide him with drinks. Feeding and watering Horace was still a messy affair, but it had worked, he had actually put on a little weight.

“Is that it..... Will he die now ?” Asked Kata.

Ish just nodded at the crying girl. He didn’t trust himself to speak without bursting into tears. Ish had shared so many of the creature’s memories.

“We tried to analyse the green gas in the sphere.” Said Biff. “Maybe at a top of the line lab..... But here.....We don’t understand what it is, so we can’t make him more of it.”

Horace had given him memories and mental images of the green vapour that was essential to him in some way they didn’t understand. The gas was corrosive and contained a little chlorine. Most of it though was a soup of organic chemicals that the lab’s equipment just looked at and shrugged. It was alien, so alien the analytical equipment could understand it, much less replicate it. An organic catalyst was their best guess, the way human bodies need small amounts of various vitamins.

“He’s going.....Please move away Kata, take your brother over to where your mum is.” Said Ish.

“Do you think he’ll do something dangerous ?” Asked Inka.

“No we don’t, we just don’t want to take any chances.” Said Biff.

They’d put sensors around where they thought Horace’s brain was located, or at least the organ producing what looked like brainwaves. Way off the alpha scale if he’d been a human, the brain appeared to be in his lower body. As the alpha waves stopped, Horace died.

“He’s gone.” Said Ish.

The kids cried as Horace toppled over and lie on the floor, his legs twitching for a few seconds. Ish found himself closing his eyes to hide the tears he could feel coming. There was a little guilt mixed in with the sorrow, they had taken and stored some of the green gas. Probably enough to have kept

Horace alive for another few days, but they'd needed some it. Kata was walking back towards Horace.

"No..... Don't go near his body." Said Ish. "You can stay for a while, but don't go close to him and definitely..... No touching."

The green gas was worrying, especially as the aliens intended to introduce it into Earth's atmosphere. Only a tiny amount, just a few parts per million, barely enough to register as a percentage. It was corrosive though and they had no idea what it might do. Ish and Biff had come to an agreement, they needed to find a lab capable of analysing the gas. It was essential to find out what it might do to the humans who survived the initial invasion. The decision about Inka and her kids had been totally Biff's idea though he did approve.

"I know you want to go home eventually Inka." Said Biff. "Ish and I are going to London. If you want to, you can come with us. Or we can take you to a refugee centre, your choice?"

"I don't recommend the refugee centre." Added Ish.

Kata and Antun were looking at their mother and nodding. Despite the kids getting under their feet occasionally, Ish would miss them if they went. Biff was more attached than him and thought of them almost like good luck charms.

"Yes, it would be nice to stay with you and I think my children will be safer if we are around you and your soldiers." Said Inka. "When do we leave?"

"About two days time, maybe three." Said Ish. "We have a few things to finish before we go."

"Please don't cut him up..... Not poor Horace." Said Kata.

He was learning to be a little more diplomatic. At one time he'd have told Kata the truth and risked her tears.

"We just need time to tidy up." He lied.

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Brenda Grundy wished they'd had reliable radio detonators. With the alien interference and their own screening systems, using any kind of wireless device was a problem. They'd used old fashioned clockwork timers, one of the few things the aliens couldn't jam or confuse. Not for the first time she asked Duncan the question.

"How long do we have?"

"Fifteen minutes."

Everyone knew she meant how long until the huge amounts of high explosives went boom and they all understood the time was cutting it close. They'd been attacked by robots all the way down the tower and now there were scores of them waiting near the doors on the ground floor. It was another delay they couldn't afford and Matt was using binoculars to look at the robots.

"None of the big stuff, no giant lizards." Said Matt. "Just the robots."

"They're bad enough." Said Owen.

"I need to get lower down the ramp, cover me." Said Matt.

It amazed her that sometimes the robots ignored them, as though they'd been given specific orders and couldn't deviate from them. It seemed to be a weakness in their design, one that could be useful. Matt stopped at the bottom of the ramp and all the robots ignored him.

"Probably waiting for us to try and leave." Said Duncan. "Then they'll kill us all."

Duncan was like that, always full of uplifting positive comments.

"I can see the APC through the doors, it looks untouched." Said Matt. "Call them Bren, make sure they're still operational."

It was still her job to cart around the heavy comms system. She had an idea the soldiers in the APC wouldn't appreciate a call and she was right.

"Come in APC, are you alright?" She asked.

"We were, until you just lit us up light a goddam Christmas tree, for every alien with a radio tracker."

"Tell them to cut the crap." Yelled Matt. "Can they still use all their weapons?"

"You heard the boss." She said. "Are you still fully operational?"

They had to have heard Matt shout, there were probably people in Melbourne who'd heard him.

"Yeah..... Sorry..... We're ready.... All system fully functional."

Matt took the microphone off her.

"I want you to use all your weapons on the robots outside the doors." He said. "Just for two minutes and stop. Don't fire again, because we'll be running towards you like crazy people.... Do you understand?"

"Yes sir, when do you want us to begin firing?"

"Now."

The fire was withering and included energy weapons mixed with a few high explosive shells. When the noise stopped, Matt stood up and began to run.

"Follow me and run." He yelled. "Keep running until I stop running.... Then hit the dirt."

Bren began to seriously hate the comms system, its weight slowed her down. She didn't look left or right, her eyes remained fixed on Matt. A few of the soldiers fired at the surviving robots, but most just did as ordered.... They ran like crazy fuckers. The smoke from the two minutes of weapons fire cleared and Bren felt exposed, running over dry sandy soil with no cover at all.

"Now..... Get down." Yelled Matt.

His internal clock was just about perfect, the explosion happened about two seconds after Bren had tried to push her body into the dry soil. They were still too close, if the top of the tower was falling their way.

"We did it..... We actually did it." Someone shouted.

Luckily the top of the tower was bending away from them, twisting as it went. Some of the structure was hidden by the smoke from the explosion, which was rising up, forming a flat mushroom cloud of super-heated debris.

"Oh, isn't that a beautiful thing to see." Said Owen.

"It's twisting.... The whole thing is twisting.... It's all going over." Said Bren.

There was a moment when the top of the tower looked as though it was being supported by an impossibly thin piece of the metal structure. Then it all twisted and began to fall. Bren was certain the tower was finished, when something exploded about a third of the way up.

"Was that us? Something we left behind?" Asked Matt.

"No, probably one of their generators or something." Said Duncan.

It took a minute, maybe more, for the entire structure to twist, fall and hit the ground. Bren felt the ground beneath her vibrate as the tower hit the dry, rocky ground. It seemed unreal, almost impossible that their small group could have caused such complete destruction.

"There'll be a few satellites left Bren." Said Matt. "Try a linkup, try a call to base."

At one time it would have been routine, now her hands trembled as she pressed the SatLink option.

"Green..... Fuck, we got a connect.... It's green." She said.

"Call them.... Say hello or something." Said Matt.

"Hello, this is Brenda Grundy of the Fifth West group near Maningrida. Commanding officer is Matthew Newman.... Come in please."

Nothing, she looked at Matt and he was still smiling.

“Don’t worry Bren..... Someone will be whooping and running across the room about now.”

It seemed to take a long time for a voice to answer her.

“Well done Brenda Grundy, you guys did it. We’ve got green lights everywhere..... Christ, we’ve got green lights from as far away as Indonesia.”

~ ~

Vicky Meadows would never have described herself as a risk taker. Her own mother had once called her dull, to her face. When Vicky recalled it, the insult had included the words dull, boring and tedious. Despite the lack of faith shown by her mother, Vicky had managed to get a decent degree and a place in Base Albion to carry out some post grad research.

“Vicky.... You didn’t check in Again.”

Damn, she picked up the communicator.

“Sorry Herman.... It won’t happen again.”

“Anything to report ?”

“No..... Oh, I saw a mouse.”

“Yep, a wonder of nature and used in motivational speeches. Everyone expected roaches to go with us to the space colonies, but not mice. Nature always finds a way though and if the humble mouse can stow away in containers and get to all the way to the Moon and Mars.....”

“Then we can get to the stars..... I know Herman, that crap is on every Christmas.”

“Just stay awake Meadows.”

The doors to the contaminated section of Mordor Two had been welded shut and then titanium sheeting had been fixed over the doors. The air was clean, the water uncontaminated. The only worry was that MacLaren hadn’t really gone home to Earth. She was out there, in a shuttle full of heavily armed commandoes. The usual sort of crap conspiracy theory, but Sylvie had decided it meant guarding the main airlocks around the clock.

“No one dares disagree with Sylvie.” She muttered. “Never upset the Führer.”

The mouse showed itself again, or it might have been a different one. That was the trouble with mice, they all looked the same.

“Go away mouse.” She said. “A source of inspiration or not, come too close and I’ll stamp on you.”

It climbed up onto the chair next to hers and squeaked at her. Not a quiet humble squeak, the damned thing seemed to threaten her. She waved her hand in its general direction.

“Fuck off Mickey, or you’ll be gloop on the bottom of my boot.”

It actually ran at her, leaping across to her chair. Vicky jumped and became annoyed that a mouse had made her jump.

“Damn thing.”

As her hand waved at it in the hope of scaring it off, the mouse bit her.

“Oh, you little..... That’s it !”

Vicky swung her hand hard and made a good solid connection with the small rodent. It was no super mouse, the blow that sent it crashing into the metal wall was fatal. Vicky felt a little guilty when she saw its lifeless body on the floor.

“Damn, why did you have to bite me ?”

The bite was small, but it looked red and inflamed. After an hour her cheeks felt hot and flushed. She picked up the communicator.

“Herman, this is Vicky at Airlock Delta. I just got bitten by that mouse.... I’m not feeling too good.”

“No, you’ve made excuses before. You’ve an hour until you’re relieved, that’s all.”

“But I’m burning up.”

“Leave the airlock unguarded and I’ll have you restricted to your room for a week.”

It wasn’t an idle threat, he’d already had her restricted to her quarters for an entire weekend.

“Alright Herman, but I’m not messing about..... I’m feeling really ill.”

“Use the Autodoc..... But only after you’ve been relieved.”

“Alright.”

Vicky leant back in the chair and tried to make sure she didn’t fall asleep. Being asleep on guard duty was punishable by having no evening meal for two weeks.

“Ridiculous..... They treat us like children.” She muttered.

Vicky began to feel sweaty all over and she genuinely was feeling very unwell.

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