

Ishmael

Chapter 16 – Diaspora 8

“Their treasurer with no money to look after, had startled him out of his own dark thoughts. Marjorie was the council’s unofficial conscience, the one who grounded them when difficult decisions needed to be made. There hadn’t been any truly difficult matters to decide on though, not until now.”



Richard Martucci quite liked Andy Korenberg, he’d run across him a few times at the European Space Agency. A lot of the space science types Richard had met were cold fish, humourless individuals who seemed happiest when working out payloads, flight durations and atmosphere drag. Andy was different; he made the humans top priority in his designs. He wanted the people in the craft he designed to be happy and comfortable. At the moment Richard’s main thought, was the quality of the Fifth West uniform he was buttoning up.

“Oh wow Pam.” He said. “Tell them to burn our grubby old Albion uniforms, these are..... Even the shirt isn’t scratchy under my arms. If only they didn’t look quite so....”

“Hitler youth ?” Asked Pam Rath.

He sighed and looked in the mirror. She was right in a way, the black fabric with gold edging did look far more militaristic than anything they’d worn at Base Albion.

“I was going to say it looks a bit military, but I can live with that.” He said. “People used to say the Albion uniforms looked a bit weekend warrior.”

“We were weekend warriors Richard. My real job at Albion was science officer. Though I have to admit.....Nothing itches in places you really don’t want to feel itchy.”

They’d been given officer’s uniforms, Pam had even been given trousers and a skirt. The material had to be manmade fibres, everything was these days. It felt good though and fitted well. He’d often wondered who the Albion uniforms had been designed for, it definitely wasn’t humans. Everything pinched, though you did get used to it.

“You’re wearing the skirt ?” He asked.

“Yes, it’ll make a nice change. Haven’t worn a skirt since.....Must be five years, maybe six.”

“You once told me you’d never be seen dead in a skirt.”

“I know, but it feels nice, and they did give me a choice. What do you think ?”

Pam did a twirl and Richard realised he would never understand women. He did what he was getting far better at....Being polite and diplomatic.

“It looks very nice..... Come on, we’ll be late as it is.”

The base was operating with a skeleton crew, with the security team making up about ninety percent of the personnel. There were literally hundreds of spare rooms. Richard and Pam had claimed one of the rare suites with a double bed. They’d both missed the wonderful, almost brutal pleasure of sex in full Earth gravity.

“I refused to be rushed.” Said Pam. “Just one last look at my hair.”

Pam Rath did scrub up well and the black uniform showed off her curves. It worried him that she might want to run off and look for her family. They were all wise enough to know though, even the students, that trying to find anyone in the chaos was just about impossible.

“Ok, you can now escort me to dinner.” Said Pam.

Putting on thick outdoor coats spoiled the effect, but part of their walk took them out into the cold Norwegian weather. The people from Albion could pretty much go where they wanted, apart from the third of the base behind several locked doors. Richard's hands were feeling the cold before they entered the blue domed building, he'd forgotten to wear gloves.

"I keep forgetting we're on about the same latitude as Siberia." He said.

"Probably why they hid it here."

"Hid what?" He asked.

"Whatever is behind the locked doors. I'd love to get a look at whatever needed the services of the best spacecraft designer on the planet."

"So would I, but behave..... Andy has treated us like honoured guests."

The second floor of the blue dome building had a dining area large enough for twice their number. Andy had told them it was a special night, a night for new clean clothes and something special in the way of food. Some of the students had volunteered to raid the freezers and prepare a feast. In many ways, Richard was dreading it.

"Wow, how hard did you have to beat her to get her into a skirt?" Asked Kitty MacLaren.

"Nothing to do with me." Said Richard. "I'm as amazed as you."

"Someone raided the emergency stores." Said Pam. "Candles in jars, this must be a special occasion."

There was a wonderful smell of cooking, a mixture of baking bread and some kind of meat being roasted. There were named places for everyone, they'd put Pam and him next to each other. He hoped someone was being thoughtful, rather than being a smart arse.

"If the food is half as good as it smells." Said Gene.

Their host appeared as everyone was finding their seats. Andy Korenberg was wearing a dinner suit that wouldn't have looked out of place at a state banquet. He was even wearing a bow tie.

"Please find your places and enjoy the evening." He said. "We're celebrating nothing in particular, other than our CEO Jaroslav Verga, deciding that you can see the entire base. Everything, including research projects that have been kept completely secret until now."

"What sort of projects?" Asked Pam.

"Enjoy the meal first." Said Andy. "A direct link with Mr Verga is timed for roughly when we'll be enjoying coffee and a glass of brandy. It'll be put through to the big screen in here."

There was no broadcast entertainment now, the large screen was showing a repeating loop of colourful fractal effects. Andy couldn't escape interrogation from Pam, he'd been placed almost opposite her on the seating plan.

"When can we see the secret projects?" She asked him.

"Enjoy the evening, we don't usually live this well." Said Andy. "Tomorrow I will personally give your people a guided tour of the entire base. You might even be able to help with a project we've had to bring out of mothballs because of what Ishmael McGrath has told us."

"Who is Ishmael McGrath?" Asked Richard.

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Deb Newman ran into Bridlington station in a panic, the shouting crazy lady not that far behind her. Every other one of the drugged up crazies had fallen away through fatigue or disinterest. Not Sheila though, she was still running after her, shouting threats while waving her knife. Deb might not have felt so scared if she hadn't witnessed Sheila kill Jack, who had been a huge bull of a man. Now he was just dead flesh on the pavement outside the pharmacy.

"I'm going to cut you up bitch." Yelled Sheila.

Her own stupidity and panic made Deb unconsciously run towards the platform for trains to London. Laughing at herself brought her out of the huge anxiety hole she'd dug for herself. She'd never officially been trained by the army, but Matt had spent a lot of Sundays showing her a few of what he called shake hands techniques.

"There will be a lot more Sheilas." She muttered. "Are you going to run from them all?"

Deb made her stand in the middle of the up platform. She could see Sheila slow down, as she realised her prey had decided to stop and fight.

"I'm going to cut you a lot, bleed you out real slow." Shouted Sheila.

Deb dropped her pack on the ground, but only after removing something else she'd taken from the shop that sold pots and pans. It had been hanging on the wall, she'd been surprised no one else had grabbed it. She felt the weight of the knife in her hand. Perfect, heavy enough to do some damage, even if it didn't penetrate the skin. Of course she was hoping to use the sharp stabbing end of the huge blade. Was it supposed to be a meat knife? Deb had no idea, but the long heavy blade and riveted on wooden handle, had made it look like a medieval weapon. She waved it about a little.

"I won't turn my back on you." She yelled. "You won't find me as easy to kill as Jack."

If Sheila had been intimidated by the huge blade Deb was waving about, she didn't show it. Her shouting did become less inventive though.

"Fuck you." She yelled.

For some reason Deb began pointing her finger at Sheila. She held up her left hand, using her index finger to point.

"You..... You're a rag bag, a crazy person." She shouted.

She'd remembered a film with a line about not pointing at crazy people. Perhaps it annoyed them, really annoyed them. Deb hoped it worked just as well on pill pushing junkies. She pointed and tried to look more confident than she felt.

"You're the one who'll be bled dry today."

"Bitch." Shouted Sheila.

Obviously pointing worked. Sheila ran at her like a knife wielding express train. Deb had seen something done by a boy in the school playground, when she'd been about fourteen. It had been a long time ago and it wasn't the sort of thing you could practise. Worse still, timing was important and Deb had never seen it done since, or tried it herself. It was though, the only thing she could think of.

"You're going to die today Sheila." She yelled.

An adversary using your name might have spooked some people, but not pill popping murderers like Sheila. On she came, building up speed as her knife hand went back and up. Deb waited, looking just at Sheila's feet. As those feet were less than three feet away. Deb went down, rolling herself into a ball. Get it wrong and she'd given Sheila a gift, an open target to plunge a blade into her back. Luckily Deb didn't get it wrong.

"Jeeezzzz." Yelled Sheila.

Just as with the boy in the playground, her opponent was too close to stop or jump over her. Sheila was running flat out when she tripped over Deb. She went flying, arms and legs all over the place. Down the platform she tumbled finally stopping when her back met the side of a vending machine. Deb resisted the temptation to run over and finish the job. Sheila was a far more experienced street fighter than she'd ever be. Like a cornered rat, she'd be at her most dangerous when hurt. The kid who'd taken the tumble had been on the ground for a long time. He was still there when the

teachers had cleared the playground. He couldn't have been seriously injured or died though, someone would have mentioned it at morning assembly.

"Bitch..... You don't even fight right."

Sheila shouted as she stood up. She was rubbing her left hip, but that might have been for effect. Sheila was holding her knife and looked alert. As far as Deb was concerned, her opponent was unharmed and ready to go.

"Rag bag..... One of us is dying today and it won't be me." Shouted Deb.

Deb prayed she was right, but she was far from confident. No more yelling from Sheila and the rubbing of her hip carried on. There was a certain wariness about her too, it had probably been a while since she'd met a victim who'd fought back quite so hard. Deb had spoken the truth though, one of them was definitely going to die, she just hoped it wasn't her.

"Let's get this done." Said Sheila.

It happened by chance, Deb moved behind one of the metal columns which supported a sign board. Having the pole between them seemed to annoy her opponent, so Deb began to deliberately keep the pole between them.

"Oh..... Fight right you fucker."

Sheila tried to stab her in the upper arm, but Deb easily side stepped the blow. Her luck either ran out or Sheila was learning. As she side stepped the next stabbing attempt, Sheila ran her blade over the back of her left hand.

"Shit." Yelled Deb.

"See..... I said you'd bleed."

It wasn't a bad wound, blood always made every wound look serious. A clean wash with hand gel and a bandage and her hand would be fine. There were advantages in being an A&E nurse, you knew when wounds were serious and when they weren't. Crap, Sheila was becoming more confident, making lots of attempts to slash at her. It was a risk, but dusk was approaching. It was do something decisive, or risk fighting Sheila in the dark. Deb moved away from the metal pole.

No nasty remarks, no threats, Sheila came at her with her blade held up, ready to slash or stab. Instead of moving away, Deb stepped inside the blow. Matt had taught her well.

"Most people instinctively move away from an enemy." He'd told her. "Never be afraid to move in close.... So close that you can smell their bad breath. Up close you can do a lot of damage."

Deb grabbed Sheila's right hand with her left, twisting it backwards. Sheila didn't scream or drop her knife, though she did grunt and bend over backwards a little to relieve the pressure on her wrist. It was what Deb had planned and hoped for. She stabbed hard with the meat knife, right up into Sheila's stomach. It's harder than most people think to stab someone with a blade not designed for stabbing. Air pressure she'd been told, the reason special forces knives have a groove down the centre of the blade. Deb pushed harder, a good half of her knife went into Sheila and came out bloody.

"Sorry."

Two more hard thrusts, both into Sheila's chest. Deb let her opponent fall to the ground, before kicking Sheila's dropped knife onto the rail tracks. Sheila wasn't dead, she was still trying to say something. She was finished though, with the amount of blood she was losing. It was forming an ever growing crimson pool around her. It was too much, Deb turned and walked swiftly into the station. She wasn't being deliberately cruel, Sheila couldn't last long. There was no way she could have knelt down and driven her knife into her heart to finish her off.

"Oh Christ."

Sheila was still moving, her right arm reaching for something. Deb almost went back to finish the job, but the crackling electrical sound now had meaning. She froze, looking at Sheila as the bolt of energy ripped her apart. A second bolt left her death in no doubt. Deb went down, sitting on her bottom, her chin resting on her knees.

"That could have been me." She muttered.

In the heat of battle they'd both forgotten about the alien drones. It could so easily have been her body out there, blasted and burnt by the drone's energy weapons. It took Deb half an hour before she had the courage to go back to the platform and recover her backpack. No picking it up another time, she never wanted to visit the station again. What was left of Sheila was still bubbling and burning.

"If you'd just left me alone."

It was nearly full dark when she left the station and carefully made her way back to The Brambles Care Facility.

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Kitty MacLaren had already drunk three glasses of excellent wine, but the brandy she was sipping was so good. She simply couldn't let it go without comment.

"Oh wow, there is something about decent booze." She said. "Why does space travel ruin booze anyway?"

"No one knows, probably something about being transported at zero G." Said Gene. "Nothing tastes right, apart from maybe tequila."

"There are rumours the Martian colonies starting making their own booze the first year they landed. Even before they'd got maize seeds in the ground." Said Pam Rath. "You only realise the importance of decent tasting alcohol, when you haven't had any in a while."

"Amen to that."

Said Kitty, as she took a long sip of the truly excellent brandy. It definitely hadn't been accelerated at escape velocity, before being subject to zero G for days. Andy Korenberg was hitting an empty glass with a fork to get their attention.

"Please.... I'm glad you're enjoying yourselves. Live conference calls are becoming harder to keep safe and secure all the time, this may be the last for a while. Please listen to Mr Verga and give him your undivided attention."

A spinning orb appeared in the centre of the big screen, a number in it counting down from twenty. Kitty wondered how they were going to make sure a live link was kept secure. Data bursts could be bounced about all over the place, making them almost untraceable. Two way live calls were a whole different level of awkwardness to keep secure. The counter reached zero and a smiling face appeared on the screen.

"Hello everyone, I hope you're having a nice evening. My name is Jaroslav Verga and I'm the CEO of the Fifth West Corporation."

Kitty had seen his face before, but Verga was one of those men who'd achieved greatness, yet could probably walk down the street unrecognised. She sipped her brandy and let his words flow through her mind like a weather forecast. Anything important and she'd pay attention.

"I'm pleased so many talented people from Albion have turned up at our Norwegian base. You're in a need of a home and to be honest..... Fifth West could do with your help. Andy can fill in the gaps, but we had three plans for dealing with the alien invasion and the one we chose doesn't seem a good idea now."

Given the opportunity Kitty was a people watcher. Andy Korenberg was definitely giving Verga his 'I told you so,' look.

"Our first plan was to hide until the aliens left." Continued Verga. "Some of our people rather unkindly called it the 'look, duck and vanish plan.' That was when we thought the aliens would take what they wanted from planet Earth and then leave. Sadly we've now learned they've been watching us for centuries and have chosen our planet as their new home. Ishmael isn't sure what happened to their home world, but the aliens intend to move their entire population here. Waiting in a bunker is no use if the enemy never leaves."

"Can you tell us more about Ishmael?" Asked Pam. "How does he know these things?"

"Ishmael McGrath is a young man with extraordinary precog skills. I know that will sound like nonsense to some of you, but I employ several gifted precogs. Without them I probably wouldn't be alive to talk to you today. Ishmael is more than a precog though, he captured an alien and formed some sort of mental link."

"What do they look like?" Asked Richard. "Are they like us?"

"Andy has a picture and he can fill in the gaps, this call has to be short to keep it secure. You'll find the creature revolting to look at and I'm sure they feel the same about us. Mentally though.....We can identify with, and feel sympathy for their intentions. It's just a pity they intend to wipe us all out. No sharing the planet, no ignoring the few surviving remnants of mankind. The bunker below your feet might survive, but as for the quarter of a million living in various holes in the ground in Britain.....I can't see any of them surviving. The aliens will systematically dig them out."

Kitty became fully awake and alert.

"What bunker below our feet?" She asked.

A reward of sorts for her alertness, Verga was grinning in her direction.

"The workforce of the Norwegian base and their families weren't evacuated, they went underground." Said Verga. "They're deep below your feet, in a bunker capable of supporting them for decades, perhaps centuries. They're going to be left there, as another string to our bow. Fifth West has many other such bunkers in isolated places. Deep underground and screened against detection, at least a few should be missed by the aliens."

Wine and the excellent brandy were removing the few inhibitions Kitty still had.

"We found the alien specimens in Unicon Two." She said. "You should have told the world what you knew."

"And achieve what, beside mass panic? I can see why the research upset you, I'm not proud of some of the things we put our name to. In fairness most of the specimens were found long before Fifth West existed. We were acting for friendly governments, who wanted everything kept secret. As those governments are now probably irrelevant, I've given Andy permission to tell you anything and everything you might want to know. You might find the results of the weapons research useful, we have made some very effective weapons."

"We need to kill the link soon." Said Andy. "They're getting better at tracing our calls."

"Yes, yes of course....The second plan was to use the weapons to fight them off, make Earth too hot for them to stay. That isn't going to work when an entire population of an alien world has decided to come here. The weapons will be useful, think of them as another string to the Fifth West bow. Which takes us onto the final plan, the one we mothballed. It was Andy's plan and.....I'm sorry I didn't let him talk me into finishing the project. It's called Diaspora Eight..... Andy can tell you more."

The link died, the screen went blank for a second or two, before the fractal patterns returned.

"So Andy, what is Diaspora Eight?" Asked Richard.

"A way to save a small part of the human race. I'm hoping you and your students can help me complete the project."

"But what is it?" Asked Kitty.

"Easiest if you see it." Said Andy. "I'll show you all in the morning."

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Mateo Lopez knew it would happen eventually, he was just sad it had happened so soon. There were two men in the cells, though he didn't personally know either of them. Mateo walked past the men every day, though today he stood and looked at them for some time. A decision needed to be made and the Civilian Council had been given the responsibility to make it.

"You know what I'd do." Ray had told him. "This can't be seen as a military decision. I'll give you my full support no matter what.... But you know my preferred outcome."

Had that been Ray's way of leaning on him? There were times when Mateo saw a veiled threat in just about everything Ray said to him. It was all living so close together with no way out of course. The alien bombing of Torquay had made things worse, the explosions and tremors felt underground had gone on for days.

"I'm not sure if I can be part of the decision." Said Marjorie.

Their treasurer with no money to look after, had startled him out of his own dark thoughts. Marjorie was the council's unofficial conscience, the one who grounded them when difficult decisions needed to be made. There hadn't been any truly difficult matters to decide on though, not until now.

"You can't give yourself that luxury Marjorie." He said. "The decision needs to be unanimous and there can be no abstentions. It's all in the rules we agreed to."

"Rules.... Fuck the rules."

Marjorie was the calming influence. Hearing her swear shocked him, though not as much as the dreadful event itself. There had been panic during the bombardment, two families had tried to break open one of the main doors. He'd felt it himself, the need to escape from the bunker and run away... To run anywhere. He'd fought the urge and won. The two men had killed a guard trying to open the door, before being overpowered by the guards. Their families were still being aggressive, a decision had to be made. Ray wanted it to be a tough one, an unequivocal statement that everyone in the bunker had to obey the rules, the law.

"We never thought it would come to this.... Did you think it might?" Asked Marjorie.

"To be honest.... Yes I did, though not this soon. We're a microcosm of the world up above.... It was inevitable that eventually.... If we want the protection of the rule of law, we have to be willing to inflict the worst punishment the law allows."

"You're happy to have them executed and put through the waste compactor?"

"We only have a limited amount of space in our cemetery. They can hardly be buried in hallowed ground, right next to the guard they killed."

"I don't give a shit where they end up." Yelled Marjorie.

They were attracting attention, which wasn't good. The council had to project a certain gravitas, a look of calm, even if they didn't feel it.

"Don't shout Marjorie."

"I'm sorry.... You seemed to ignore my real point. Are you comfortable with having two men executed?"

"No of course I'm not. If we don't act decisively their families will gain support and try again, though I've yet to hear where they're so keen on escaping to. I would imagine there isn't much left of Torquay after the bombardment, or Devon for that matter. Ray's men will do the deed, but we have

to make the decision. If we don't..... chaos will ensue, with everyone ignoring the law. Eventually Ray will step in, which he'll probably love. We'll be under army control, so much easier to keep us in line. Then this place will really be a prison."

"You really believe that?" Asked Marjorie.

"Yes I do, these men are murderers and they need to be executed. Not for us, we'll probably live out the rest of our lives down here, under artificial light and breathing stale air. I want my children to see the surface again and the best way of guaranteeing that is for us to make a few tough decisions right now, today."

"Fine Mateo.... Fine..... I'll vote for execution. Was I your last hold out?"

"Yes you were, I was going to call on you this evening. Do I still need to visit you?"

"No..... I won't change my mind. I do worry though that we'll lose a little of our souls."

Mateo placed his hand on hers.

"I was brought up catholic, I used to have faith in such things." He said. "No though, I often wonder if we do have souls."

"Oh Mateo.... You are the only person I've ever met who seemed comforted by a lack of faith."

Marjorie was actually laughing at him, which made him chuckle too.

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Tirsa Bates had seen as much of North Kent as she'd ever wanted to see, too damn much. Walking all day was tiring and she'd never realised before how irritating her brother could be. She hadn't seen any of her friends in months, her F-Phone was dead and worst of all.....She was expected to crap in the woods, like a wild animal.

"I don't care what it's like inside mum, we can't keep wandering about."

"We're not just wandering about Tirsa, we're looking for a decent place to stay, a new home. It needs to be fit the list we all agreed on."

"Can we at least stay here tonight?" Asked Zane.

Her fifteen year old brother seemed to be on her side, she liked him again.

"Yes..... Please mum." She added.

"Once your dad has given it a look over.... We'll decide then." Said her mum.

They all knew why her dad was looking the house over on his own, someone had fired a shotgun at them near Seasalter. It had looked to be a nice house, not that far from a large supermarket. Her dad had even shouted out as they'd entered the house, but someone had still tried to shoot him. Her mum said people were scared, but Tirsa though a lot of people just liked being mean.

"It's so big mum, I want a room on the top floor." Said Tonya.

"If we stay, I'm not promising anything." Said her mum.

The house was nice, one of the best they'd looked at and they'd looked at a lot since leaving Sheppey. There had been a lot of alien activity on the coast past Seasalter, a cloud of drones at one place. They'd headed inland, finding the house close to an infant's school in a place called Herne. A house with three floors, set back from the road and surrounded by trees. Her dad hadn't liked all the doors and windows being closed and locked, it had worried him.

"I can hear someone shouting." Said Zane.

Her brother would have run into the house if her mother hadn't grabbed him.

"No, stay here and look after your sisters."

Tirsa didn't need looing after by a fifteen year old little brother though she wasn't going to say it.

Zane had stuck up for her and besides.... It was nice to have him there, just in case. Her mother took a large knife out of her backpack and walked towards the house.

"Be careful mum." Shouted Tonya.

"Shush." Said her mum.

Once her mum entered the house they were alone. There was more shouting and one short scream, the voice might have been her mum's.

"Maybe we should go and help." Said her brother.

"No..... Mum said to wait here, give it a few minutes."

Her parents came out of the house after another five minutes. Her dad looked fine, but her mum had blood on her T shirt. There was that look about them, like refugees on the evening news. As her mum came closer, she could see she was crying.

"There was an old man, I think he had dementia or something." Said her dad. "He kept calling me Peter and threatening me with a knife."

"He cut me..... It's not serious though." Said her mum.

"Oh mum." Said Tonya.

"We dealt with it, just don't go in the first room on the left.....Your mum and I need to take care of something later tonight." Said her dad.

"Was he a bad man ?" Asked Tonya.

"No honey..... He was just unwell." Said her mum.

It took a while for it to sink in, her parents had just killed someone. He'd attacked her mum though and Tirsa had always thought there might be a fight for anywhere decent to live. It still stunned her a little though and it seemed to upset the others.

"Come on, let's get settled in, it'll be dark soon." Said her mum.

"We're going to live here ?" Asked Tirsa.

"Yes, it's close to a few large supermarkets and the roof doesn't leak." Said her dad. "No power of course, but we can bring back lots of candles."

"Is there any food ?" Asked Tonya.

"We can survive for tonight." Said her mum. "Tomorrow we'll put together a list of what we need to bring back first, like candles. Then we'll start bringing back tinned food and everything else we need."

"So much to carry, how will we do it ?" Asked Tirsa.

Her brother was giving her his worst smart arse look, something was coming.

"That's why God invented supermarket trolleys my dear sister." He said.

Her mum laughed, actually laughed. At that moment Tirsa hated her brother again, she even disliked her mum a little.

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Andy Korenberg had been determined to answer questions fully and accurately. To his surprise he was actually enjoying being a tour guide for the people from base Albion. Most of the students were young protégés in their chosen field, or they'd never have been chosen to continue their studies on the moon. Competition was fierce in space research, only the best ever made it to the various lunar bases. He'd had Shearman and the guards to talk to, but his mind had begun to turn off. The arrival of the students from Albion changed all that.

"We're there, the lowest part of the base we can reach." Said Andy. "The door under our feet was sealed after the science personnel and their families entered the bunker."

"How many are down there ?" Someone asked.

"About fifteen hundred people, give or take. There is the capacity for over two thousand, assuming births will exceed deaths."

“They really are going to breed down there ?” Asked another student.

“Yes they are.” Said Andy. “We put a lot of effort into long lasting clean power sources. Air filtration and renewal is generations ahead of anything you had on Albion, as are the water purifiers. As long as the aliens don’t dig them out, the bunker is designed to last for up to three hundred years.”

Andy looked at the Fifth West logo painted on the floor and hoped the people below their feet did live to come out of the ground again. It all depended on how good the aliens were at detecting bunkers and how much effort they were prepared to put into it.

“Can the bunker be unsealed ?” Asked Gene.

“Yeah..... How do they get out again ?” Someone asked.

“We did think about getting them out, the doors can be unsealed, though the process isn’t easy. It was considered and rejected in favour of leaving them where they are. As for them getting out again....There are various doors they can unseal in other locations and failing that. We gave them drilling equipment to dig themselves out. I like to think we thought of every eventuality.”

Kitty MacLaren was down on her knees, muttering to herself and examining the sealed door in the ground. He quite liked her, though Pam Rath had warned him to never call her Kitty.

“So, you’ve sealed up fifteen hundred scientists and their families.” She said. “Call me over critical if you like, but when they all come out again.... Haven’t you over skewed the gene pool ?”

“She has a point, you’ll need the doers as well as the thinkers.” Said Richard Martucci.

It meant giving them more information that had once been top secret. What the hell though, there probably weren’t hostile governments anymore. Just humans and aliens now.

“This is just one bunker out of a hundred and ten.” He said. “All in remote locations, all very deep in the ground. I can assure you the people living inside them are a good representation of the general population.”

“I bet they aren’t.” Said Gene. “I guarantee you’ve gone for the centre of the bell curve on everything, from IQ to gymnastic ability. It happens, no one selects junkies or criminals to repopulate the world.”

“Or dangerous eccentrics of even crazy cat ladies.” Said Andy. “You’re right of course, we did the best we could though.....But within certain limits.”

“Don’t beat yourself up Andy, Mother Nature will win in the end. I bet when and if they come out of their bunkers, there are a few eccentrics among them. Good job too, the world needs its crazies and misfits.”

Andy was never quite sure if Kitty was arguing with him, mocking him, or being genuinely supportive. It seemed the perfect time to move the conversation onto another topic.

“The doors to our left will take us into a tunnel, which leads to the Diaspora Eight project. It’s a quarter of a mile from here so there are electric buggies and other vehicles. A quarter of a mile doesn’t sound far, but try doing it six times a day while carrying something heavy. We added the buggies after walking it for six months.”

Good, they were laughing, even Kitty. The doors were electrically opened and even he felt a little in awe every time they opened and he’d done it hundreds of times. The doors opened to reveal a brightly lit tunnel, full of buggies and baggage trains. The tunnel entrance looked like the baggage handling area of a medium sized airport.

“Wow....What else do you have down here.... A McDonalds ?” Asked one of the kids.

“To keep us together, we’ll use the baggage train.” Said Andy. “Get on board and get yourselves as comfortable as you can, it’s not that far.”

Students will always act like students, it took them a while to settle down. Eventually Andy drove the baggage train down the centre of the tunnel. It didn't surprise him when Kitty went flying past them in an electric buggy. Pam Rath was stood next to him, tutting as Kitty went past.

"A born contrarian I'm afraid, but worth her weight in gold." She said.

"I'm sure she is, though she can't get far. The doors at that end have a biometric lock on them." Sure enough, they found Kitty sat in her buggy and trying to look nonchalant. She was certain to have tried opening the doors, it was what he'd have done.

"You will all be given access to the project." Said Andy. "For now, follow me and be careful. The project was mothballed, there will be loose cables and unguarded machinery. Don't touch anything.....Nothing inside meets any health and safety standards."

"Sounds just like Albion." Said one of the students.

Andy placed his hand on the door pad and entered a six digit number. He then waited for all the sounds of amazed people. It still made him think of Disneyland mixed with the NASA museum in Florida.

"Jeeezzz..... How much did all this cost?" Asked Kitty.

"A lot, more than Fifth West could afford." Said Andy. "Funding in return for some of the research you saw in Unicon Two and a few other things. A lot of senior people in a lot of countries had places reserved to leave the Earth. Not that I can see many coming to claim their seats."

He didn't have many new visitors, none at all for quite a while. Andy Korenberg was mostly a scientist, but there was a little showman in him too. He did a twirl, before bowing slightly to his audience.

"Welcome to project Diaspora Eight." He said. "A few of the last Diaspora design shuttles, created to take mankind to a new home, somewhere among the stars. There are more of them in other locations, they're mankind's last hope. A way to save a tiny part of the human race from extinction. It's just a pity the prototypes worked, but the final versions don't."

They probably hadn't listened to him..... All eyes were on the huge shuttles in a hangar so large that it had its own weather system up under the ceiling. Occasionally clouds would form and a small amount of rain would fall.

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