

Ishmael II : Pandora

Chapter 4 – The Green Death

“Going anywhere in the Eleanor wasn’t going to be fast, but that was the same for all ships. A few knots of speed kept up twenty four seven was how ocean travelling worked.”



Pam Rath had quite enjoyed Norway, mainly for the crisp weather and the miles of tree covered landscape. Now it looked as though she was a member of the Filey Campus, until flights resumed, which probably meant forever. At least Richard had been with her when JV had ordered a grounding of all Fifth West aircraft. The world had changed, marriage partners likely to be dead and almost certainly unlikely to show up. Pam had noticed though that quite a few married people having affairs, had looked uncomfortable when Deb Newman had called her husband in Australia. If she could contact him ? Ironically Deb now seemed to have started a bit of a fling with Art Singer. “Blame mother nature Pam, not those involved. Sex and affection are a need, not just a desire for pleasure. If the person you love isn’t around anymore, people need to satisfy the need with someone else. Like that old song Pam.....Love the one you’re with.”

Louise Olvera, the HR and Admin person had told her after a few glasses of campus made white wine. Louise moaned about her job all the time and went on for hours about getting the shitty end of the stick. Get her drunk though and she was the perfect drinking buddy. She offered support without judgement and never seemed to be indiscreet.

“Sounds wonderful Louise, but we’re now in an age with no contraceptive pills and a dwindling supply of condoms. Trust me, we’re about to have a baby boom on the campus.”

Was that a necessarily bad thing ? When she was drunk it bothered Pam, the whole idea of bringing new life into such a dreadful world. When sober, she viewed sex and childbirth as a reaffirmation of life. She wasn’t quite out of her own child bearing years though and felt like cheering every month when the trickle of blood began. Louise had been no help of course.

“Yes you’re a bit of a hypocrite with weird double standards Pam.....But hey, who isn’t ?”

Pam was currently stood next to Richard and Deb Newman, as they watched the latest recorded pep talk from Jaroslav Verga. JV was still moving his location every two days and Pam quite liked the glimpse of scenery in the background of the weekly recording. No live broadcasts anymore, the recording were sent as encrypted high speed data bursts.

“There’s a spruce tree behind him and I can just about see a birch.” She muttered at Richard. “I bet he’s still in Scandinavia, maybe Finland this time.”

“Quiet please.” Yelled Andy Korenberg.

People tended to moan about the weekly briefing from JV, mainly because it was always big on inspiring buzzwords, but low on useful information. Francine had even started working out where JV was by the angle of the shadows from the trees in the background. It really could be that Boring.

“Northern Finland.” She muttered.

“See.... I was right.” Said Pam.

“JV records these messages at great personal risk.” Shouted Andy. “Please have the courtesy.....To listen quietly.”

Understandable really. Record a boring message to some of the brightest surviving people on the planet and they're bound to play and lark about. The interesting thing was that in many ways, Pam looked forward to everyone getting together in the main hangar to watch the recording on a huge four meter wide screen. Perhaps JV knew a thing or two about motivation after all.

"I'm pleased to announce that the last significant problem has been solved." Said JV. "The scientists at Campus R had the breakthrough and we can now produce enough propellant to get our fleet to the stars."

"Who are Campus R?" Asked Richard.

"That's us." She replied.

"Oh."

At one time every campus received a personalised recording. Now it was always something that felt a little too generic. Nice to receive anything though, even if just to silence the constantly re-emerging rumours that JV had been captured or killed.

"I know we've still a long way to go, but we can do it.....You can do it. As every piece of technology is tried and tested, the knowledge can be passed onto every other campus. With some of the best minds in the world currently working round the clock, we will succeed."

A few people clapped as the recording ended, though most didn't. There was no bad news from JV, there never was. Like old world war two newsreels, he simply ignored the last working laboratory they'd had in London being destroyed. There was no mention of the Israel Campus going silent, or problems in Indonesia. All those bits of news filtered through though.

"That was a waste of time." Said Deb.

"Maybe, maybe not." Said Pam. "It does give us an opportunity to gather together once a week."

"True, very true." Said Richard. "It gives me a chance to ask Deb about all those rumours regarding a few bottles of genuine Potemkin coming into her possession."

Deb was grinning at them. Officially all food and drink brought in from the outside world had to be tested and kept in the food stores. In reality everyone grabbed what they could, from wherever they could find it. Even Francine wasn't averse to receiving something to liven up their rather bland rations.

"As if I'd forget my favourite scientists from Base Albion." Said Deb. "Come round this evening and I'll have a bottle for you."

There it was again, being treated like an official couple. Pam love Richard, but she thought everyone should have the good manners to at least pretend they weren't sharing a bed every night.

"What do you want in return?" Asked Pam.

"Can we just say you'll owe me one huge favour at some time in the future?"

Richard was looking at her, the look in his eyes beseeching her to say the highly iffy piece of bartering was fine. A favour might mean anything, but it was Deb Newman. She was hardly likely to want their help in fomenting rebellion.

"Fine by me." Said Pam. "With the proviso that the favour doesn't mean I could get locked up for years and years."

"Me too.....Everything she said." Added Richard.

Deb just laughed, which wasn't exactly reassuring. Pam had to admit to herself though, she'd have probably joined a revolution for two bottles of Potemkin.

"I'll see you both tonight then." Said Deb.

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Matt Newman quite liked Doug Barrett. The trader and general dealer in contraband had helped them transfer a huge amount of tinned food to the cupboards of the Eleanor. The chance to refuel had been useful too. By the time they were passing the coast of Bali it just felt as though Doug was settling in a bit too much.

"I think we should encourage him to find his own boat. Two's company and three's a crowd as they say."

He's said to Bren after some early morning sex as the sun had just begun to come through the two portholes in their bedroom. He'd been a little surprised when she'd disagreed with him.

"Three isn't exactly a crowd Matt and supposing one of us got sick or hurt ? I think we should let him stay as long as he likes."

By the time they were dressed and thinking about breakfast, it was agreed that Doug was to be the third member of the crew if he wanted to, or as Bren put it.

"Unless he does something unpleasant or inappropriate of course."

What was inappropriate behaviour on post-apocalyptic planet Earth ? Matt thought the bar had moved quite a bit. Breakfast and a warm sunny morning did a lot to improve his mood. He was actually happy as they watched the coast of Bali go by.

"Safest to stay out to sea." Said Doug. "There are rumours that the aliens are building a huge city in Central Java."

"Have you seen it ?" Asked Bren.

"No, but some traders I know have. Very few seem to come back from the interior now, but those who do describe a huge cube like city that rises up until it almost touches the clouds."

"Sounds like fisherman's tales to me." Said Matt.

"You might be right, but they're definitely building something huge. Singapore is best avoided too, lots of their robots there. The aliens seem to prefer hot humid places."

Bren was giving him a look that said 'see I was right' and 'I told you so' in equal amounts. It seemed that Doug with his local knowledge might be useful after all, as long as it wasn't all nonsense.

"Where do you think is reasonably safe Doug ?" Asked Matt.

"Nowhere, but the way we're going shouldn't be too bad. Then we could head north past Cilegon and make for Borneo. I haven't heard of anything bad happening there..... Yet."

"North does take us a bit closer to England.....Sort of." Said Bren.

Sort of heading for England, guided by a trader who'd managed to lose his own boat. It all sounded madness, but if he was being honest, he'd never expected to get out of the Northern Territories alive.

"Borneo it is then Doug." He said. "Any place in particular that you know of ?"

"Just keep to the west of Borneo. There are a lot of villages on the coast where they know me. We'll probably need to look for fuel at one of them."

Going anywhere in the Eleanor wasn't going to be fast, but that was the same for all ships. A few knots of speed kept up twenty four seven was how ocean travelling worked. They probably wouldn't reach Borneo for days, but at least they had a plan. Bren was certainly looking happy. For Matt, the day lost its sparkle when he saw the three alien craft at just under cloud height.

"There, three of them." He said, pointing. "I haven't seen anything like that before."

"Me neither.....Might be the Chinese fighting back I suppose." Said Doug.

"They never had anything like that.....Trust me." Said Matt.

Like a mass of blue steel girders, bent in graceful curves and given the ability to fly. The three craft looked to have no visible means of propulsion or even staying in the air, yet there they were. Big too,

larger than the biggest aircraft Matt had even seen, by a long way. At the centre of each craft as if peeking out between the girders, was an intense blue light.

"They look about as aerodynamic as a house brick." Said Bren.

The three craft ignored them and carried on heading east at speed.

"Bigger fish than us to fry." He said. "I'm glad they ignored us of course, though I also feel a little insulted. We did bring down one of their jamming towers."

Doug was looking at him as though he was mad, but Bren understood, she was smiling at him.

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Ishmael McGrath was back in favour again, in a huge way. There had even been a personal encrypted message from JV, sent by data burst. It looked like a picture taken of a hand written letter. There were a lot of nice comments and very few bad ones. Ish wanted to take JV to task for one unkind comment, but realised it was time to accept that he'd won and let it go.

'.....and you have achieved what I thought to be impossible. Andy will be in overall control of the labs, but I am giving you autonomy when it comes to researching the aliens and the new Horace.....Misunderstandings about resources should be a thing of the past.'

"So no more having Art following us about." Muttered Ish.

'.....The main thrust of research must be to understand the green gas and find a way to stop it being toxic to humans. I know you'll always have your own pet projects, but please help Pandora as much as you can. We're all relying on both of you now Ish.....Sure you won't let us down...'

There was even a note from JV's daughter at the end, Lianne. She spoke about being able to see something special in him during his first interview for a job with Fifth West. It was a full on sucking up to him letter from the Verga family and it was working. Ish was normally cynical about JV and his mood swings, but so much praise.....It was a little intoxicating. He was currently stood next to the new Horace, who had a completely separate area of the pens to live in.

"What does she feel like?" Asked Kata Malovic.

They were there again, the Malovic children, though their mother Inka was still there to keep an eye on them. Inka still thought of the aliens as godless abominations, but she rarely voiced her feelings. Most adults tended to shudder at the sight of Horace, but her kids had grown attached to the original.

"She's not hostile." Said Ish. "If your mum agrees you can come and touch her."

"Me too?" Yelled Antun Malovic.

"One at a time, we must look as strange to her as she does to us." Said Ish. "But....Only if your mum thinks it's alright."

A bit wicked really, asking Inka to agree in front of her kids. There was very little chance she'd upset her children by saying no.

"You're sure it's safe?" Asked Inka.

"I am."

"Alright then."

Safe was probably overdoing it, but the first Horace had never attempted to harm the kids. True he'd added a piece of tissue to Ish's brain stem in some way, but that was different. Kata gently stroked the female alien, who even Ish had to admit, didn't smell too good. Kids were like that though. They'd run away from a friend with a bloody finger, but happily play with frogspawn. Kata stroked the yellow skin of the female Horace, from the back of what was probably her neck, to what was definitely her bottom, the end the poo came out of.

"Wow, her skin is rippling." Said Kata. "I think she likes that."

"I'm sure she does."

Horace looked like a cross between a huge maggot and a grub, yet Inka's children obviously loved her, as they had the original male Horace. Antun had his turn to stroke the adult alien, as though she was a puppy, or an eight week old kitten.

"I heard her purr." Said Antun.

Imagination of course, unless he could hear the very low frequency sound waves that Horace seemed to make all the time. It might be a language, Ish had no idea. The only thing he knew for sure, was that Antun couldn't hear that frequency.

"Wow Antun, you might be right." He lied.

The female responded differently when Ish touched her, she could obviously sense he was different in some way. The vibrations in her skin were like ripples in water. Which was wonderful, but it wasn't exactly high level communication. Most pets didn't have a high level of consciousness, despite what their doting owners might think. Horace was no pet though, she was an alien with an intelligence at least equal to his.

"Sorry Kids, I need Horace all to myself now." He said.

"Awwwww." Howled Antun.

"Come on, Ishmael needs to work." Said Inka.

"You're not going to hurt her are you?" Asked Kata.

Did they know the original Horace had been dissected after dying? Ish thought they probably didn't. There was no way he could make such a guarantee, but he did it anyway. The creature was an alien after all and her kind has wiped out at least four billion humans, maybe more.

"No, I will never hurt her."

Inka left, her miserable kids following her. It was day one in his attempt to communicate with the new Horace and there was no fail option. One way or another he had to be able to talk to Horace in a meaningful way. He knelt down and gave Horace some of the balls of cooked cabbage, which the previous Horace had loved.

"Here you go, I know you love these."

Boiled cabbage rolled into balls, but the Horace ate it with the relish Ish reserved for a Friday night curry. Scooped out of a bucket, he offered a dozen cabbage balls on the palms of his upturned hands. She used a wicked looking arrangement of pincers and feelers, to pick up the balls and push them into her mouth. She did it so gently, that he never felt a pincer touch his hand.

"We're going to be the first of our kind to talk." Said Ish. "If I can talk to you, I can talk to all of your kind. If I can talk to you, I might find out how to neutralise the green gas. This is day one and I'm going to play some of your low frequency waves back to you."

Ish hugged the creature, pushing his face next to what might well be her face. He was hoping for the kind of mental link he'd had with the original Horace, but felt nothing.

"Early days, early days." He muttered.

He had a sudden panic, as the idea filled his mind that only male aliens might have the ability to communicate with their minds. No, that didn't make any sense at all.

"We begin." He said.

He played back a recording of her sounds, watching for a reaction, watching for just about anything encouraging to happen.

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Pandora Gray had been about to complete her final exams to become a doctor, when the alien invasion had ruined so many people's plans. There had been a note for her in with the general flyer

advising all students that the medical school in London was closing. It had told her never to claim she was a fully qualified doctor, but to help out as best she could in the coming war with the aliens. Just a final year student, yet JV had given her control of one of the best laboratories Fifth West had. The one in London had been slightly better, but that was now a pile of ruins. Unlike Ish she wasn't starting from day one, experiment one. The problem had become a crisis, which had become a potentially extinction level event for humanity and all of it had played out in the now destroyed London laboratory. She'd woken Ish up in the early hours to tell him that something strange and inexplicable had happened.

"Saint Sebastian died Ish, after seven hours of exposure to the green gas."

"Shit..... What killed him ?"

"According to the usual autopsy procedure, he died from a chronic infection reaction."

No major lab had used animals for testing or analytical work in decades. Defence contractors were rumoured to still use primates in secret labs, but no reputable organisation used animals anymore. Human cells were grown in labs, everything from a few skin cells, right through to brain cells, liver cells and every major organ. No one died of course, nor was anyone born, yet a few fundamentalist Christian groups still objected to the use of Saint Sebastians. Not the real name for the sacrificial clumps of cells of course, that was WHO1406 Epithelial ND7.

A very boring mouthful and medical students are famously keen on renaming such things. Saint Sebastian was a martyr, some would call him a double martyr. Shot with arrows and just about survived, only to be killed by being clubbed to death. The perfect person to name the sacrificial cells after, the perfect martyr. Now every medical practitioner anywhere across the globe, knew what was meant by a Saint Sebastian.

Dora was trying not to kill any of their small store of Sebastians left in super cold storage. Once the last one died, there was no way of obtaining any more and it was back to examining the effect of pathogens and toxins the old way. Which was fine but the old methods took longer. She looked at the scrolling red text on the screen and sighed, before sending the full report to Francine Lazan. Before being given the Filey Campus to run, Francine had worked for the British version of the CDC. The phone on the desk next to Dora rang about two minutes later.

"Hello Francine."

"I didn't think you were using concentrations high enough to kill a Sebastian."

"I'm not, that's the worrying thing. If the gas could normally kill at the level I'm using, we'd all be dead by now."

"Have they changed something in the gas ?"

"No, it's the same as the gas the original Horace was using and our new female. And it's exactly the same as the green gas they're pumping out of their bunkers in the north of Scotland. There has to be another factor at work here, something more than just the concentration."

"Crap Dora, JV gets notified if a Sebastian dies. You have to give me something to tell him. A guess will do, or a pet theory.....Just give me something."

"Fatty tissue, Sabastians don't have any Francine. Fatty tissue can absorb toxins, though not forever. Plus a Sebastian is the ideal human with perfect DNA. We're not that perfect, which might be a factor. There could be a few people dying out there who have text book DNA, but we'd never know." Francine went quiet for a few seconds, obviously thinking about her ideas and whether JV would buy into any of them.

“Yes, I can do something with those.” Said Francine. “JV always likes a potential solution though. I’m arranging to enlarge your team, so what are you going to do with them. I’m afraid I’m asking you to put your neck out a bit.”

“If I get this wrong Francine.....We’ll all probably be dead before the space fleet is ready. You might mention that to JV as a reason I’m extremely motivated to find a cure for the Green Death. As to specifics.....”

“I need something, though I like the Green Death, nice name for it. What do you plan to do Dora ?”

“Alright, though this isn’t carved in stone or anything. The old techniques they used to control and assess pandemics a hundred years ago are still valid today. I intend to get half the team using those techniques against the gas. I might even recommend we use resources to filter the air we breathe and recycle all our used water.”

“Oh, JV will hate that, but I could see air filtration coming our way eventually. Anything else ?”

The next idea was the one Dora had only thought about while waiting for Francine to call. It would mean tying up a lot of their expertise on one project. It would be worth it though, she was certain of it.

“We’d never have known the gas was toxic, if the Sebastian in London hadn’t died. So we will need to use more Sebastians to test any theories about making the gas harmless. We will need to create more Sebastians right here, on campus.”

“Can we even do that ?”

“In theory, no we can’t.....But we have to. It will mean sacrificing one of our existing Sebastians so we can grow tissue and organ cultures from it. Then I’ll need the best medical and biology people we have to turn the cultured tissue into new Sebastians. I know of two Bio-Med experts among the survivors of Base Albion. They’re currently being wasted bruising their knuckles to put rockets together.”

“I don’t think Andy would agree with them being wasted and.....Sacrificing a Sebastian Dora. Do you have any idea what they cost ?”

“Money is now officially meaningless.” Said Dora. “Keep mentioning us all being dead before Andy’s fleet is ready. I think that will help sell my ideas to JV.”

“Begin now Dora, start getting your ducks in a row. I’ll deal with JV.”

“Thank you Francine.”

Dora wanted to call Ish, but she knew he’d been looking forward to his first undisturbed day with the new Horace. She did send him an internal message though, wishing him luck. She had no real idea why the Sebastian had died, the automatic systems were saying some form of chronic infection reaction, again.

“Like solving a murder.” She muttered. “I have to begin finding my evidence....And I need to do it quickly.”

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After calling Dora, Francine had thought of a name. The perfect person to add to the Bio-Med team to work on creating a new batch of Sebastians. Thinking of the name had brought her to the Memorial Chamber. At one time there had been quite a few trainees at the campus and a few engineering apprentices. Add on the support staff and quite a lot of people had left to be with their families in the early days of the invasion. Disasters overseas were often far too easily ignored. The attack on Heathrow though and the thousands of dead.....That was when non-essential personnel had been released to be with their families and loved ones. The result was freeing up a lot of rooms and halls that had once been full of young trainees.

“Welcome to the Memorial Chamber.”

Said the sign on a board that had been fixed on the wall to the right of the double doors. The large room in the first level basement had been used as a mess hall. No windows, no plants, just row upon row of tables and chairs. Now a few ultraviolet bulbs made sure there were lush plants in several places. A fairly bland beige paint job had been softened by a few murals painted by a few of the more artistic postgrad students. All in all, for a room in a basement, Francine thought it looked dignified and respectful.

“Francine.”

“Gerald.” She muttered back.

No rule about talking quietly in the chamber, but everyone did. Francine thought it was important that a Memorial Chamber was never left unattended. A request for volunteers to keep the place tidy, the plants watered and the grieving sympathised with, had brought in dozens of eager volunteers. Eagerness doesn't always equate to aptitude or reliability though, but there were enough people to make sure someone was always sat in the chamber, and Gerald was one of the best.

“Rick was just in....Still no sign of Anne-Marie.” Said Gerald.

“We have to keep hoping.”

The walls were the important part of the chamber and all four long walls were covered in photographs and names. Just one wall was dedicated to the known dead, the other three were for the missing. Not that the campus employed fools, they knew full well that most of the missing had died during the invasion. But as Francine had told Gerald, people need to hold onto a little hope. The picture she wanted to look at was in the section for the known dead, Francine had even attended her funeral.

‘Penny Brownie.’

Had been written on the picture in blue marker pen. There was a brief hand written mixture of biography and eulogy on a card beneath the picture.

“Poor Penny, I never did like you.” Francine muttered.

No one had, apart from Dora, who remembered her fondly from their days at medical school. Penny was one of the six science staff who'd been killed by the alien bombing, there had barely been enough left of her to bury.

“Do you need to talk about her ?” Asked Gerald.

“I didn't like her and for just a moment, I'd forgotten she was dead. Does that make me a dreadful person Gerald ?”

Thankfully he didn't hug her, that might have caused her to give way to tears. Gerald was good at looking after people though, a born natural at it. He held her hand for just the right amount of time.

“No Francine, it just makes you human.”

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Steve Penboss quite liked the old house. Not really a stately home, just a large mansion built by a wealthy local businessman. Why it had been left abandoned and neglected for years was accepted as one of things by the local population. If you avoided the waterlogged rooms and the corridor with wet rot in the floorboards, it wasn't that bad a place to live. Not as nice as his house of course, but at least they were all alive. Even Jada had stopped moaning about the mansion not being what she'd expected.

“Stop fidgeting.” Muttered Daisy.

“Sorry.”

He'd always had trouble sleeping in a new bed for the first few days. The mattress in the old four poster bed had been dry but dusty. A good beating with a chair leg had removed most of the dust. Luckily Daisy had considered a decent set of sheets and a quilt as essentials when packing. He always slept with his right arm across Daisy. She found his hand in the dark and held it.

"We'll be fine." She muttered.

And she was asleep again, as though she hadn't a care in the world. Steve tried to keep still and empty his mind of all troubling thoughts. They had some food, clean water and the old mansion was secure enough to keep out wild dogs. Were there wild dogs? They had become a bit of a fixation since the huge Mastiff had attacked him. At least he and Daisy had clean bedding, Jada and Luis had to make do with grubby blankets they'd found in a hall cupboard.

"Next time I'll decide what we call essentials to be packed." Jada had moaned, and moaned.

Everyone did have a safe place to sleep, or as safe as anywhere was since the invasion. That was it, the reason why he was having to resist turning over for about the tenth time in less than an hour. People talked about tossing and turning in bed, but for Steve the need was all too real. He held Daisy's hand and tried some deep breathing exercises. It was the invasion driving him crazy and the loss of his house. Plus the realisation that eventually there'd be no places left to hide. The aliens would build their own cities and they didn't seem to have included humans in their plans for the future of the planet. There were no curtains on the windows, so the first flash of light lit up the room. The sound followed a few seconds later. An angry insistent boom that seemed intent on waking everyone up. Daisy was instantly awake, gripping his hand as she looked towards the south facing windows.

"Oh, what was.....Are they bombing Manchester again?" She asked.

They'd watched the explosions to the south from the bedroom of his house, though the last had been some time ago. The Royal Navy had annoyed the aliens, earning the complete destruction of Torquay. They didn't pick up many rumours, just a few bits of gossip from passing travellers. It appeared the aliens had been really pissed off by something or someone in Manchester. No one really knew why, but what had been a city of over five million souls, was now a hole in the ground.

"No Daisy, nothing to worry about." He said. "It's good old fashioned thunder and lightning."

The flashes in the sky and the booms were strangely cathartic, probably because they were natural. Would the aliens be scared? Did they have thunder where they'd come from? The idea of aliens hiding from the storm comforted him a little.

"It's beautiful.....Come on, I want to watch it." Said Daisy.

They stood in the window, a sheet their only protection from the cold of the night. Nature was putting on a wonderful performance, a light show that even the huge alien armada couldn't stop.

"Wow, that seemed to hit somewhere." He said. "Somewhere close too."

The booms and crackles were coming just after the flashes, as the storm moved closer. The noise had stopped him hearing Maria enter their bedroom. The toddler was stood next to them in her pyjamas. Wide eyed she was watching the flashes light up the sky.

"Don't be scared, lightning won't hurt you." Said Daisy.

"I know that.....I hope it scares them though, the aliens."

"So do I Maria, so do I." Said Steve.

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