

Ishmael II : Pandora

Chapter 10 - Priozersk

“At the heart of the small fleet was a genuinely impressive vessel, a modern hydrogen powered coast guard patrol boat. It even had a couple of deck guns, which looked to have been installed by its current owners.”



They never really had been aimlessly roaming around Russia. Jaroslav Verga had waited until his advance scouts had found the facility intact, before telling Lianne their true destination. He'd always liked the forested area around Lake Ladoga and the way the locals actually respected keep out signs on fences. They'd stopped for a break only a few kilometres or so north of Priozersk.

“Crap.....I knew I'd been bitten. Look.....There's a tick on my leg.” Said Lianne.

“A forest full of deer, I'm afraid things like that will happen. Probably harmless, though you can get the Autodoc to check you over tonight.”

His daughter wasn't afraid to give the bulbous tick a twist and pull it out of her flesh. With a look of disgust on her face, she threw it on the ground, before stamping on it.

“I did wonder if we were heading for the old Priozersk base.” She said. “Isn't it a ruin now ?”

“Mothballed, but you know me.....I rarely close anywhere down completely. The bio research being done there was moved to lunar bases, but the facility still has power and a clean water supply. Plus of course, a working medical department. Only a few top level Russian politicians ever knew there was a joint operations Fifth West base on Russian soil. As far as I'm aware their military thought it was just a supply base.”

“Like the base in Norway.”

“Yes my dear, just like the base in Norway.” He said.

“I hope it isn't still full of Biohazard level four samples ?”

“No, the entire facility was thoroughly cleaned and any viable samples were sent to the lunar bases. There is a big advantage to the Priozersk base, one that means we're likely to be here until the Diaspora craft are finished.”

“What's that ?” Asked Lianne.

He moved closer to her, so she'd be able to hear him answer her in little above a whisper. Even Knowles couldn't know what he was about to say to her. He trusted everyone with him, or they wouldn't be part of his special team. It was just that soldiers were the worst gossips in the world, and they could often worry over the most trivial things.

“Being a base intended to work with high level biohazard materials, there is a full air filtration system that can be modified to include the catalyst Dora Gray has perfected.”

“Will Ish and Biff be coming here ?”

“No, we'll just need the materials dropped by drone. I can put the filters together, I used to be a damn good engineer once you know.”

“I'm sure you were dad.”

Knowles came to tell them it was time to move and that they should arrive at the Priozersk base well before nightfall.

“It'll be so nice to have a proper bed again.” Said Lianne.

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Deb Newman had already given Ishmael and Pandora a bottle of Potemkin, one for each of them. It wasn't just that she realised the value of their friendship in a world where they were held in such high esteem. She actually liked them and there was the whole weird synchronicity thing going on with Ish. Neither of them understood it, but they both felt it. They'd been destined to meet, which sounded so hokey that she rarely talked about it, even with Iris. She stood outside their apartment door at seven in the morning and pressed the bell push. It took a while for Dora to open the door. "Oh Deb, I'm still half asleep."

Perfect hair, with just a trace of makeup. Dora looked pretty neat and tidy for someone half asleep. Deb congratulated herself on working out that seven was the right time to annoy them. Any earlier and they really would be half asleep. Any later and they'd both be involved in brain mangling science projects.

"Sorry....I'll be honest; I've come to ask a favour. I do come bearing gifts though."

The bottles in the second box of Potemkin vodka had been larger than in the first box, though Deb hadn't realised until she'd emptied the box and lovingly polished the bottles. A full litre compared to seven hundred and fifty millilitres. The two bottles Deb held up had to be tempting, a suitable present for annoying someone over their breakfast.

"Well....When you put it that way Deb. Come in, join us for breakfast. We've got cereals and something that looks and tastes vaguely like milk."

"I like the campus milk substitute.....As long as no one tells me what's in it." Said Deb.

"Slugs and snails and puppy dog's tails." Said Ish.

Deb still helped herself to a bowl of cereal covered in the fake milk of unknown ancestry. Between mouthfuls she outlined her idea that despite her age, Iris really did deserve a seat on a shuttle when the ark fleet left planet Earth.

"....you and I have this weird connection Ish and I feel the same way about Iris. The way we were thrown together that day. I wouldn't mind betting we're the only people who survived the attack on the hospital."

"What does Francine think?" Asked Ish.

The question Deb had been dreading, though her reply had to be honest. Ish might take her world for a small lie, but Dora would definitely check with Francine.

"She said that Iris is unlikely to survive the trip and that younger people in far better physical shape are being refused places..... And before you ask, Andy said much the same sort of thing. It's Iris though Ish.....It's Iris."

"Difficult for us to intervene if the two top people on campus have already said no." Said Dora.

Deb put the two bottles of almost legendary vodka in front of her, one either side of her cereal bowl.

"I need to call in those favours to be used at a later date guys." Said Deb. "Plus there are some on campus who would give me their firstborn for one of these larger bottles."

They were looking at each other and if it had just been Ish.....But Dora was the tough one, the one shaking her head.

"We can put in a word, but it is Francine's decision." Said Dora. "We do owe you that unspecified favour, though it has to be something within our ability to deliver."

"I could go on about you both owing me at least a good attempt at getting Iris a shuttle place." Said Deb.

"I will talk to Francine and Andy, you have my word." Said Dora.

"Tell them I know Iris is important in some way.....I feel it.....I know it."

"Can Iris keep a secret?" Asked Ish.

“Once I’d have said no, she should have been called Radio Filey. Now though... She has learned to keep her mouth shut when it matters.”

“Good, then you can tell her I’ll get her on one of the Diaspora shuttles.” Said Ish.

“Ish.....” Said Dora.

“I’ll do it; I give my word on it.” Said Ish. “One way or another I will get Iris onto a shuttle when we all leave. Nothing to do with favours or because we all like Iris, even if she can be annoying. It’s because I respect your opinion if you say Iris is important in some way.”

“Thank you Ish, I’ll let her know.”

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Daisy Lorhan hadn’t known what to expect. She wasn’t a boat expert, but the collection of varied types and sizes of vessels wasn’t what she’d expected. Everyone had seemed surprised, though the motley collection of ocean going boats had been pronounced in good condition by Commander Archer. Fishing boats, pleasure vessels of all sorts. Even one or two genuine navy patrol boats the Kingdom of Devon and Cornwall had found in a museum somewhere. At the heart of the small fleet was a genuinely impressive vessel, a modern hydrogen powered coast guard patrol boat. It even had a couple of deck guns, which looked to have been installed by its current owners.

“Reminds me of a TV documentary I once saw about Dunkirk.” Jada had said. “The small ships being used to rescue soldiers from the beaches.”

A bit whimsical maybe, but it did seem to fit their strange assortment of boats. The worrying thing, as Steve said to her later, in private was;

“A lot of these boats are so old....They might have been there at Dunkirk.”

Their fleet spread out once they were in open water, to form what one of the crew referred to as a convoy formation. At the centre of the convoy was the coast guard patrol boat, keeping an eye on everyone by radar and the very occasional brief radio message.

“We spread out for over a mile, which is why the last convoy was split up by bad weather.”

One of the crew had told them. Later he told them splitting up was to keep any attack to a small number of vessels. It appeared an early trip to Jersey had lost half the boats it had started out with.

“Still better than starving among the ruins.” Luis had said.

Some of the crew were quite friendly and admitted that life in Jersey was far from idyllic. There was enough food though and so far at least, the aliens had never bothered to attack the islands. As for where they were going after Jersey ? All the crew of the ‘Blue Moon,’ simply refused to answer and said they’d be told in Jersey.

“Well.... If they do turn out to be cannibals, they’re reasonably friendly ones.”

Steve had whispered to her later. The Blue Moon had been a passenger vessel, a ferry to take people and freight around Jersey and the other islands. A decent size with proper accommodation, they’d done better than the Chase family, who’d ended up roughing it on a fishing boat. For some reason they’d ended up at the rear on the convoy and could only see the coast guard boat as a dot in the distance. At night they couldn’t see any other boats as none of them were carrying lights.

“I must admit, I quite like the Blue Moon.” Said Steve. “Some people would pay a fortune for a cruise like this.”

“Somewhere warm though, it’s not really cruise weather.” Said Daisy.

The first night had been idyllic, even if the weather wasn’t exactly wonderful. Rain, winds and a minimum night time temperature a few degrees below zero. To make matters worse Luis seemed to enjoy telling them how long they’d survive in the cold ocean water if Blue Moon were to sink following an attack.

“The water out there will be about four degrees centigrade.” He’d told them, far too often. “That means you’ll be unconscious in fifteen minutes and dead in forty, even if you’re wearing a lifejacket.”

Of course the Kingdom of Devon and Cornwall didn’t seem to have any lifejackets, so if the worst did come to the worst; they be going into the ocean in the clothes they stood up in.

“Fifteen minutes and you’ll be dead....Drowned.”

Luis had told them, despite being glared at by Jada. They all knew it was a risky trip, they had known that before getting on the boats near Combe Martin. Any risk was better than trudging cross country, while hoping an alien creature didn’t find you.

“I just wish Luis had been put on another boat.” Said Daisy. “Does that make me a bad person ?”

“No, I wish we’d left the annoying swine behind.” Said Steve. “Who’d have thought mild mannered Luis Lopez would turn into a death by freezing and drowning bore.”

“Jada whispered that he’d been in the sea cadets as a teenager.”

“Jeez.....I might chuck him overboard if he starts up again.”

There was no alert in the early hours of the morning, no agitated member of the crew banging on doors. Jada was in the room next door and began to bang on the wall at around two in the morning. After a few moments, she was at their door.

“I saw it.....Couldn’t sleep. Huge beast heading towards us from the south.”

Poor Jada was in such a panic that she could hardly catch her breath. They all went to the porthole and quickly decided that being up on deck would give them a better view. Cold weather forgotten, they were soon all on deck dressed in nightclothes with coats quickly pulled on over the top. It was raining and for some reason the four of them had the deck area to themselves.

“I see it.....There.” Yelled Luis, while pointing.

Like some kind of giant beast it hurtled at them out of the storm. Two huge eyes that glowed brightly as it came, it was obvious the creature approaching wasn’t created by nature.

“Alejandro saw something like that once, crossing Torbay.” Said Jada. “Where is he ? Surely we can’t be the only people awake.”

“Someone in the crew saw it.” Said Steve. “Listen.....The engines have stopped.”

In silence, while rain beat down on them, they watched the creature with two huge glowing eyes, as it went past them in the night. It missed them by at least a hundred feet, which still seemed far too close. Difficult to see its size in the dark, but those eyes.....They implied something huge was passing them, with most of its body hidden under the water.

“Like a huge alien alligator.” Said Daisy. “Maybe it looks scary but isn’t dangerous.”

“Everything they’ve sent against us has been dangerous.” Said Steve.

No one seemed to notice the rain, or the cold, as they crossed the deck to watch the alien creature head north. Just as the glow from what looked like eyes began to be hard to see, there was an explosion.

“Fuck.....It found one of the boats in our convoy.” Said Daisy.

The thought uppermost in her mind was selfish, the relief that the beast hadn’t found them as it searched in the dark. How it had attacked the boat they might never know, though it was probably some sort of energy weapon. There were several more explosions that lit up the ocean about half a mile or so to the north.

“Do you think they got the coast guard boat ?” Asked Luis. “That was over in that direction just before sunset.”

“I hope not, they were the only ones with decent weapons.” Said Steve.

“Poor devils..... Whoever they are.” Said Jada.

Quite quickly a crowd began to gather as the explosion woke just about everyone up. So many people tried to get to the starboard side to watch, that the Blue Moon began to lean over a little. They had yet to meet anyone claiming the title of captain, but one of the older members of the crew began to shout at them to spread out.

“Move to the other side some of you, or you’ll capsize us.” He yelled.

Daisy felt the vibration under her feet as the engines started up again and the Blue Moon began to move again.

“Are we going to search for survivors ?” She asked.

“We don’t stop, not anymore.....Lights and a lot of noise brings more of those things.” Said the crewman.

A few of the passengers objected to that attitude, but not that many. Most seemed pleased to avoid any potential danger.

“Probably for the best.” Said Jada. “Nothing we could do for them in the dark.”

“Will you think that if it’s us in the water ?” Asked Daisy.

“Well.....I didn’t mean.....”

“Come on, let’s get back to bed.” Said Steve.

“Fifteen minutes.....That’s how long you’ll survive in that water.” Said Luis.

“Oh, shut up.” Snapped Daisy.

Daisy rarely let herself be led anywhere, but she let Steve almost drag her back to their cabin. He didn’t say anything, though she knew why he’d done it. In Jersey the Lopez family were likely to be the only people they knew, the only ones to watch their backs. Once they were in bed, Steve kissed her and finally said something.

“Oh wow, that Jada.....What a bitch.” He said.

“She’s just old and scared.....I get that.” She replied.

It wasn’t the coast guard vessel that had been blown apart during the night, that was still there as a dot in the distance once the sun came up. They had no way of knowing who had died, until a crew member told them it was one of the fishing boats. Luckily not the one with the Chase family onboard.

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Lianne had a clockwork watch, a Herbelin automatic inherited from an uncle who had noticed her admiring it. Uncle Bernie had almost left it to a nephew, which made it feel even more precious. The watch had told the right time for a hundred years, though looking at it on the bedside table meant using a flashlight. She’d wanted to be up and dressed by seven at the latest and the watch was telling her it was eight thirty.

“Crap..... Dad will go bonkers.” She muttered.

The room she’d been given was still fairly empty without even a wardrobe or drawers for her clothes. There were a lot of rooms though and not many of them, so she’d drag what furniture she needed from the empty rooms. Being late didn’t mean missing her first proper shower in some time.

“Oh, that feels so good.”

Lianne ignored the sign on the wall about preserving water and power. She remained under the hot water until she thought her skin was beginning to pucker. Her fingers found bits of something in her hair that she didn’t want to think about. By the time she was stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror, she looked and felt like a new woman. The phone near her bed rang, spoiling the moment.

“Good morning.”

"I let you sleep in a bit.....But you need a tour of the facility."

"On my way dad."

"Actually who am I kidding. I want to enjoy a wander about and I'd like your company."

"Give me five minutes to throw something on."

"I'm in the hangar."

"Which one ?"

"There is only one.....Ask someone for directions."

Fantastic advice if any of the soldiers actually knew the layout of the place. It took about twenty minutes of being lost and confused, until she saw the sign in a corridor with an arrow pointing towards the hangar. Her father was stood in the middle of a huge almost empty space, with just enough lights turned on to make sure he could see where to go.

"First thing we do is get some decent signage." She said.

"That no one will need after the first month....Come and look at this, it was my pet project when I was here. You were tiny then, but you must remember it."

"Your flying saucer, of course I remember it. Who was it with you in those days ? He always had sweets in his pocket for me. I should send him my dental bills."

Not really a flying saucer, at least not by its shape, though when she'd been about three or four, it had always been her dad's flying saucer. Vaguely like the old NASA space shuttle in shape, but longer and far larger. It filled a section of the vast hanger and as far as she could remember, it had never been successfully flown. There was a dent on the top from where it had hit the hangar ceiling during a test run of the engines.

"You must mean Dimitri Minasyan. Brilliant mind, really superb scientist. He was relocated to the UniConsortium Moon Base along with the entire project he headed. Haven't heard from him since the early days of the invasion."

"That was him.....Pity you never got this old alien craft to fly properly." She said.

"Is that what you thought it was ? This was all our own work, though admittedly we did base it on several of the wrecked alien craft found in various parts of the globe. Dimitri and I used to chuckle about all the TV programmes about flying saucers being built in Area 51. We were actually building one in the privacy of a Russian base with attack dogs guarding the fences."

"You and Dimitri actually built this.....From scratch ?"

"Yes we did, stop looking as though you don't believe me. We'd have got it into the air too....Everything else worked apart from the engines. But as always happens, our priorities changed."

"You changed over to bio-weapons." She said.

"Yes, among other things."

There was something appealing about the grubby looking wreck, especially as she was already worried about going crazy with boredom over the next couple of years. She tugged at the hatch covering until her dad helped her open it. Inside were two comfortable looking seats that looked like something out of the old NASA Apollo Programme.

"Let's finish it dad, let's get it working." She said. "We'll both get bored stuck in this hole in the ground for years."

"Hey, I've still got all the Fifth West bases to coordinate."

"I know, but this can be our daughter and pop project, something to keep us occupied on rainy afternoons."

"I was thinking of it as a pop and daughter project." He said.

“So you’ll do it ?”

“Alright, though no moaning if I have to leave you to get on with it on your own. We’ve lots of bored soldiers to help you with the grunt work. Talk to Sergeant Barwood, he’s a damned good army engineer.”

“I won’t moan..... That’s perfect. Thanks Dad.....It’ll fly, you wait and see.”

“Dimitri and I put in a weapons system, so be careful.”

“I will dad, I will.....I’ll go and talk to Sergeant Barwood. Did the saucer ever have a name ?”

“Dimitri called it Project Firestorm. You can call it whatever you like.”

“Firestorm....I like that.” She said.

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Doug Barrett knew Matt had accepted him as a reliable member of the crew, when he’d started to be given a watch in the middle of the night, when he was usually the only one awake. Elaheh seemed to have trouble sleeping though and she was slumped in a chair, with a cup of herbal tea. “We headed north from Pontianak.” She said. “Now we’re heading west.....Why are we heading west ?”

“Carry on north and we’ll run into Vietnam and Matt and Bren want to go to England. If we head west we can get through the Singapore Strait and carry on towards the north-west, and.....Eventually England.”

“I’m not sure if I want to go to England.” Said Elaheh.

“I don’t fancy going through the Singapore Strait. Everyone I’ve spoken to told me Singapore is overrun with the alien creatures, though they might have moved on by now.”

“Isn’t there another way to go ?” She asked.

“Not really, no there isn’t. The strait is wide and the Eleanor is quite a small vessel. If we keep well to the south we should get through alright. Then we’ll head towards India, with probably a stop somewhere I know in Sri Lanka.”

“I’ve never been to India.”

“There’s a lot of Asia on our route Ela, a huge number of places you might like. If you’re not keen on making a home for yourself in England with the constant rain and cold mornings.” He said.

“I’m not sure.....I’ll have to think about it.”

“You could do worse than sticking with this pair..... They do seem to have the knack of surviving dangerous situations.”

They rarely used the radar, knowing the aliens used it to home in on and destroy shipping. Doug prided himself on having good night vision and there was a decent moon in a fairly clear sky. The sheer size of the shadow moving between them and the horizon though.....And yes, he hadn’t imagined it. There seemed to be the glow from...Maybe a fire. He brought their speed down to a crawl.

“Something in front of us.....I’m going to give the radar a quick scan.” He said.

It was if it needed to warm up, as an image gradually appeared on the screen. A few seconds told him everything he needed to know, so he turned off the radar.

“It’s a big ship, very big.” He said. “Might be a tanker, though my guess would be a fully laden container ship, drifting with the tides. Half a kilometre in length and a tonnage....I’m not sure, but it’ll be huge.”

“What do we do ? Shall I wake the others ? I should wake the others.”

“Look El, there’s something we need to get straight.” He said. “If we have a problem with each other we sort it out between us....We can handle this without waking anyone else up. You need to trust me, I’ve been sailing these waters for a very long time. Now, does that give you a problem ?”

“No Doug, sorry. So....What do we do ?”

“First we get a little closer and watch how it’s moving across our path.” He said. “We have to be careful with anything this huge. It may not look to be moving fast, but if we get in its way, it’ll cut the Eleanor in two and turn it into matchwood.”

He increased their speed until the massive container ship was clearly visible as it crossed their path in the darkness. Doug had seen ships that size before, taking cargo from east to west. The size of the thing still astounded him, as if a small island had decided to drift across the ocean.

“Wow, I’ve never seen anything like.....It’s huge Doug.”

“Alright, now we watch it for few minutes.”

He used the only fixed points, the stars in a wonderfully clear sky. Doug fixed his eyes on two very bright stars that were just above what was probably the vessel’s bridge. It took him a full ten minutes to be certain about how it was moving. There was definitely a fire somewhere aboard the container ship, he kept seeing bright flashes of flame somewhere among the mass of containers.

“It’s moving from our right to our left.” Said El.

“You’re right and I’d bet a month’s pay that judging by the outline, it’s moving stern first. That means it’s definitely dead in the water and drifting.”

“It’s on fire too....What do you think happened to the crew ?” She asked.

“Might all have been killed by an alien attack, or they took to the lifeboats. To be honest, I don’t really care. We’ll head around its prow and keep a good distance between us and it.”

Doug increased their speed and headed for the safe end to pass the monster ship, the end that would be moving away from them as they went past it. He could tell by the way El was becoming agitated, that she was about to suggest something he wouldn’t like. She was only a kid and still full of idealism and a need to be kind. He knew life would soon knock all that out of her.

“There might be some of the crew left onboard Doug. We should see if they need help.”

Crap ! If he’d been alone taking the night watch he’d have avoided the ship and no one would have known about it. Problem solved with a minimum of fuss, it was how he liked to handle things. Life was too short to worry the arse out of every situation.

“The ship looks to be moving slowly, but we’ve talked about this El. If we try to go alongside in the dark and it moves towards us.....It’s matchwood time and a long swim to Singapore. Plus that thing is as high as an office block, we’d never get onto the decks. If we did..... That fire looks to be getting worse. So, we go past it and carry on heading towards Singapore, agreed ? Or of course you can ignore me and wake the others, your choice.”

She never moved and as they went past the prow of the ship, El just grunted and nodded at him.

“You’re right, the fire is getting worse.” She said.

Bright red flames coming up from somewhere in amongst a vast number of containers. In theory such vessels didn’t carry hazardous cargoes, at least in theory. He’d known of people sending containers full of paint and other highly inflammable liquid.

“Yep, it’ll make a hell of a mess wherever it strikes land.” He said.

“I fancy some soup.....Go halves on a tin with me ?” She asked.

“Brilliant.”

The deck of the Eleanor was designed to give a three hundred and sixty degree view of the ocean. It was nearly dawn before they could no longer see the glow from the burning container ship.

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Filey wasn't exactly famous for having a tropical type of weather, in fact it seemed to be fairly cold for much of the year. When the Fifth West designers had put together their plans for constructing the campus, they'd used pretty much the same heating and ventilation principles as used in places like Norway. Lots of insulation anywhere the cold air could get in, or the warm air could get out. Restrict incoming air from outside to a series of ducts leading to a combined air conditioning and heating system housed in its own small building. The campus was far from being airtight, even after the recent work done by the engineers. It would do though, enough filtration of the air to make sure they weren't all poisoned by the Green Death, or at least not in the next two years or so. Francine had offered to help Ish install the new filter elements, though her help mainly consisted of watching him work.

"I was hoping to keep this fairly secret Ish." She said. "We don't want to start a panic. I'm sure JV won't be happy that rumours are beginning to spread."

He was at a fiddly bit with two spring clips that had to fit perfectly, so he ignored her. Not usually a good idea with Francine, she tended to remember and she held a grudge for longer than the mafia. Ish pushed the filter home and was happy that try as he might, he couldn't make it wobble about. "Perfect, just two more to do." He said. "As for people on campus getting in a panic, where else have they got to go Francine?"

"There might be a full blown insurrection....It happened in Base Albion."

Whoever had told her about events in the lunar base deserved to be flogged. Ever since Francine had heard about it she appeared to live in dread of a revolution taking place in the Filey Campus, with the leaders putting her head on a stick outside the main door.

"This isn't the moon Francine....Can you pull the tool box please, it is on wheels."

He'd put on his old clothes, which actually described most of the things he usually wore. Francine on the other hand was in one of her expensive looking suits. She seemed in morbid fear of getting dirty and the handle on the toolbox was quite greasy.

"I've got the filters to move.....Please Francine, we'll need the tools."

She pulled the box on wheels as though it might bite her, but it saved him from having to leave it there and make two trips. The second filter was in a walled off section at the rear of the main refectory. A large section of the room which most on campus weren't even aware was there. Francine waited until he was up a ladder before continuing her interrogation.

"Have you heard anyone spreading rumours about the green gas Ish?"

She was accusing him again, he could tell by the tone of her voice. The sad thing was that he actually liked Francine most days and like most mildly authoritarian leaders, she had her uses. No one hated Francine, but moaning about her latest pronouncements and gaffs was a useful safety valve for everyone's inevitable feelings of resentment. There would be no violent coup, though Ish did think JV would replace her within the next six months. His personal bet would be on Andy becoming campus leader, with Francine as his assistant.

"No I haven't heard any rumours Francine, but people deserve to know the truth." He said. "We're alright indoors with the filtered air, but what about the farmworkers. There are also the scavenging teams and the regular patrol. They'll still be breathing toxic air and if we give them masks with filter.....The rumours will become accepted facts."

"It is you, I knew it." Yelled Francine. "You're the one causing trouble."

He wanted to yell, he really wanted to yell fuck at her until she ran away. All that might bring a temporary feeling of euphoria, but there would be consequences. The old filter came out of the

pump and it was covered in about a decade's worth of dirt. He dropped it so that the dust flew up over Francine's immaculate suit.

"Sorry.....No Francine I'm not causing trouble. You are with your lack of flexibility. No wonder there's such a bad feeling among the postgrad students."

"There's bad feeling, really?" Asked Francine.

Ish hadn't intended the conversation to go the way it had. There was an opportunity though, to feed Francine's paranoia a little to achieve something worthwhile.

"Oh come on.....You must realise you're not exactly loved." He said.

All leaders liked to be loved of course, it explained all the rallies and chanting from their faithful minions.

"I don't.....I mean, no Ish. I hadn't realised I was that unpopular. There are hard choices to be made of course and I have to make them."

Ish gave the new filter a hefty wallop with a rubber mallet and it clicked into its slot. More dust went over Francine's suit, though she didn't seem that bothered anymore.

"Right....Tidy up here and just one more filter to change." Said Ish.

"What are they saying about me Ish, those dreadful students?"

"Nothing that bad, just that maybe.....You sometimes need to be a little more human. I need the ten mill socket for this....No, the one behind.....Thanks."

"I am human Ish, but there are difficult choices."

"Like chucking Iris off the Diaspora shuttles."

"That is so unfair; she'll be ninety by the time we leave."

Ish picked up the last filter and put the ladder over his shoulder. Francine pulled the toll box along as though she'd been doing it all her life.

"Iris is very popular though Francine. If you can find a spot for her on a shuttle, it will undo the ill will from a lot of those difficult decisions."

"Alright, I'll tell Deb we've found an extra place for Iris. I don't expect any more sniping though, from you or Dora....I hope you understand."

"We'll both be perfect minions....Seen but not heard. There is still the question of filtered masks for those outside most of the time."

"Andy mentioned that too.....I'll get the engineers to look at possible designs."

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"Otis seems to like his new home." Said Mateo Lopez. "I'd swear he smiled at me when I fed him this morning."

"And we finally found a use for the old barn." Said Helen.

The roof was still half missing and the doors still didn't close properly. The weather was getting warmer though and getting Otis comfortable for the following winter was going to be a project for the entire family.

"Of course Otis won't be with us that long, don't get too attached." He'd told his kids.

Some chance of Otis going in the pot, they already loved him. Even Mateo couldn't picture himself killing Otis. After all, he hadn't been able to throttle a chicken.

"I'll start repairing the roof next week." Said Mateo.

"He really does seem happy in here." Said Helen.

One side of the barn had already been fenced off, so getting it ready for the huge male pig had been fairly easy. Once spring had fully arrived, there were plans to build Otis an outside run. He was going to be a high maintenance pet and Mateo accepted that, even if he'd never admit it to Tina and Tom.

The kids would normally have followed him into the barn, but they were both busy building a scarecrow to keep the birds out of the kitchen garden.

"The damn sparrows will dig up anything." Helen had said.

Like all of the projects given to the kids, Tina was in charge of the scarecrow project, which meant it would take a while and be one hell of a scarecrow. Helen was near the barn doors and heard the sounds while he fed Otis his third or fourth carrot treat of the morning.

"It can't be.....That sounds like horses." She said.

Matt took a shotgun everywhere after the incident in the old orchard, with the alien creature who looked like a man. He put the shotgun over his shoulder and joined Helen outside. She was right; three people were approaching on horseback. They were heading towards the house, until Helen waved at them.

"Where exactly are the kids ?" He asked.

"Way out past the hen house, building the king of all scarecrows." Said Helen.

"Good."

All three of their visitors were wearing some kind of grey uniform and after events in the bunker, he was wary of anyone in uniforms. They were quite close before Mateo could see their unexpected visitors were two men and a woman. The man on the lead horse dismounted.

"I don't know how we missed you." He said. "Been out this was collecting information a few times and always thought no one lived here."

"We like the privacy." Said Mateo.

The other two dismounted and all three of them were armed. The woman and other man had rifles over their shoulders, old fashioned bolt action rifles. The man in front of him had a huge heavy revolver in a holster on his hip. Weapons that belonged in a museum, but that didn't mean they weren't effective. The woman produced a clipboard from a bag.

"Just you two is it ?" She asked. "Can I have your names please ?"

Helen just looked at her and shrugged.

"Who the hell are you people ?" She asked.

In answer the woman handed them both a single sheet of paper from the Kingdom of Devon and Cornwall. It talked about offering transport to a new home for those thought suitable. It didn't mention about what might happen to those found unsuitable.

"Now, can I have those names ? And a date of birth." Said the woman.

"It really is in your own interests to be cooperative." Said the other man.

All three were armed, though trying to use the rifles quickly wouldn't be easy. As for the man who appeared to be in charge, his huge heavy old revolver was in a holster with the top buckled down. Mateo was reasonably sure that he could take care of them with the shotgun, if it came to it. They'd have friends though, probably a whole army of them.

"I've never heard of this Kingdom of Devon and Cornwall and I worked at a senior level for Torbay Council." Said Mateo.

"We're more ex-military than local government." Said the guy in charge.

"How about some names from you ? And where are you based ?" Asked Helen.

"We're currently based in Jersey." Said the other man.

"Jersey.... What the hell is the Kingdom of Devon and Cornwall doing in Jersey ?" Asked Helen.

The man in charge glared at the other two, as if telling them to shut up.

“There have been no attacks on Jersey, so it makes sense to have our headquarters there.” He said.

“Like it or not you are now part of our Kingdom and we will eventually need your details. There will of course, be some form of taxation to pay. You can either cooperate.....Or move on.”

“Yeah, you’re either with us or against us.” Said the other man.

“For the moment put us down as undecided.” Said Mateo

They got back on their horses and left heading back towards the old road where the army vehicle had fallen into a sinkhole.

“They’ll be back.” Said Helen.

“Yes and next time there will be half a dozen of them.”

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