

Ishmael II : Pandora

Chapter 16 – St Petersburg

“It was there in front of her, the bombed and ruined city of St Petersburg. Almost no moon, but two fires down near the Neva River illuminated that area of the city. Something had been burning for a while, though they had no idea what was burning. A few areas had been left almost untouched by the attacks, though others had been left as nothing but cratered ground. A bare arm went around her and found a breast to hold.”



Synchronicity can't be ignored, even if you don't believe in it. Even if people put the most obvious signs down to coincidence, for good or ill, synchronicity still worked the strings in the background. Liza Bates had never heard of synchronicity, yet it was about to change her life very much for the better. Not that she had a clue about that, when her son Zane brought her the leaflet.

“They're all over the place, an aircraft must have dropped them during the night.” Said Zane.

Her daughter Tirsa was out somewhere, hunting with a bow and a few homemade arrows. At one time there had been little to hunt in the woods in their part of Kent. Nature had begun to reclaim the land though and livestock had escaped from safari parks. Now there were deer in their woods and although they had nothing against the harmless creatures, fresh meat was better than living out of tins.

“Go, go and find your sister.” Said Liza. “You shouldn't have left her on her own.”

“But the leaflet mum ?”

“I'll discuss it with your father....Go, your sister shouldn't be out there on her own.”

Tirsa would be fine of course, she always was. It was important though, to make them hunt as a pair. Liza read the note and sighed; it probably meant a long walk through dangerous areas was going to be needed. She found her husband Tyler at the house where the young couple had lived and died. He was gradually enlarging the cellar beneath the house to make a secure bunker, just in case. There were so many 'just in case' worries, that she didn't like to dwell on them.

“The kids found this note, they're finding them all over the woods.” She said.

He read it and probably pulled the same facial expressions she had. Fifth West were a large corporation, or at least they had been and people tended not to trust large corporations.

“They're making a lot of claims for these pills.” Said Tyler.

“You do have the unexplained cough they mention.”

“It's just a cough, we had a damp winter and I'm not getting any younger.”

“You're only forty three, or maybe forty four.” She said. “I lost track of our birthdays somewhere and just remembered the kid's. You don't look well honey and the cough is getting worse.”

“It's Rochester though, one of the worst places we travelled through.”

“It might be better honey.” She said. “We have to go, or by the sound of it.....We'll all die from this gas they mention.”

“Alright, but we go as a family.” Said Tyler.

“I'm sure the kids would love a trip to Rochester, a chance to go wild.”

“That's what worries me.”

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The medical school building had lots of entrances, which Barwood had considered a risk. Not enough of a risk to abandon the building, but definitely a risk. To Lianne lots of entrances meant lots of exits and ways out if anything bad did happen. Had Barwood realised why she'd been so keen on having a room all to herself on the top floor? Probably and he more than likely thought of her as a spoilt rich brat, an oversexed rich kid. Maybe even Nigel thought of her that way, it was too soon to tell if he genuinely liked her, or was just in her bed for the sex. He'd be awake, he always woke up when she either went for a pee, or as now, had come for a look out of the window.

It was there in front of her, the bombed and ruined city of St Petersburg. Almost no moon, but two fires down near the Neva River illuminated that area of the city. Something had been burning for a while, though they had no idea what was burning. A few areas had been left almost untouched by the attacks, though others had been left as nothing but cratered ground. A bare arm went around her and found a breast to hold.

"Why are you so obsessed with looking at such destruction?" Asked Nigel.

"It's beautiful in its own way." She said. "Like an opera Diva in her old age, enough remains of her greatness to remind you how wonderful she once was."

"You can be a little strange Lianne."

"You're not the first to mention that. Come on, let's go back to bed."

No showers, they were both relying on hand sanitisers to get clean, with a little water used sparingly to clean their teeth. He had a masculine smell to him as he lay back naked on the bed. She too had the perfume of recent sex and roused woman. She was getting used to the almost visceral effect his naked body had on her and the perfume of arousal. It had been a while since there had been anyone in her life, even for a one night stand. Her mouth went over his erect dick and she enjoyed the way it tasted.

"Oh, that is so good." Said Nigel.

It had been a while, but she hadn't wasted her time at college, she knew what she was doing. Just a few hot breaths as she used her lips on his dick, before she went for the condom on the shelf above the mattress they'd thrown on the floor. Even putting on the condom was part of the fun, all that smoothing it out and making sure it went right down as far as his balls. There was the old joke about women coming with instructions, just ask them. She'd realised while at college, that the same could be said for boys. Dear sweet Elliot had answered all her questions and taught her so much, while also giving her so much pleasure.

"It's keeping the thrusts at the right pace.....And consistent." He'd told her. "In my experience, girls who go on top, rarely get it right."

She did, his wisdom and hours of highly enjoyable tuition had paid off. She mounted Nigel and felt his whole body quiver as his dick went right into her, right up inside, until it hit the sweet spot that always made her sigh.

"Keep up the same steady thrust Li, even if the guy looks to be having a fit." Elliot had told her.

"Actually, especially if he looks to be having a fit. You'll learn the best time to stop."

Not that it was all about giving the guy a good time, she enjoyed it going in deep too. Nigel began to thrust up as she came down. The effect was wonderful and when he acted like he'd just had an electric shock, she knew it was time to stop.

"Oh, if your dad could see you now."

She laughed and decided Nigel was alright, he might even be a keeper. Provided he felt the same way about her of course. Being the rich guy's spoiled kid had its advantages, but it had put some guys off in the past.

“Don’t go to sleep yet.” She said. “We still have a little unfinished business.”

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Bren Grundy didn’t need the charts to tell her where they were. A view she’d seen on postcards from an uncle who had briefly lived there, and a few calendars she’d seen on office walls. A place that had been in the news a few times as yet another disagreement arose between Britain and Spain. Doug joined her at the wheel and he too knew where they were.

“The Strait of Gibraltar, the famous rock with its apes.” He said. “There were times, especially when we were on the run in Sri Lanka. I never thought we’d live to see it.”

“And beyond the strait is the Atlantic Ocean.” Said Bren. “Turn right and we’re almost home.”

They were too far away from Gibraltar to see any details, which was probably a blessing. The aliens had probably considered the gateway to the Mediterranean to have strategic importance. Bren had heard stories of its destruction right at the beginning of the invasion. Very few had survived and escaped from the carnage.

“It looks so peaceful.” Said Matt.

“You must have smelt the coffee.” Said Bren. “How is Ela doing ?”

“Healing and resting, I gave her two more pain killers, mainly to make her sleep.” Said Matt.

“I stitched her up and gave her what antibiotics we had.” Said Bren. “The rest, as they say, is in the hands of whatever Gods Ela believes in.”

“She’s young and strong.” Said Doug.

“I still can’t imagine her killing that thing, with a knife.” Said Matt.

The Eleanor wasn’t slow, but there was the whole thing about travelling by anything across the ocean. Nothing seemed to happen, nothing seemed to change, it was like watching paint dry. Then Bren realised Gibraltar was slightly behind them, rather than being slightly in front.

“The charts have the main shipping lanes.” Said Bren. “Probably safer to use those, I have no idea about the dangers closer to the coast. We’ll likely to bounce around a bit, the Atlantic can be a little rough at this time of year.”

“It might be Wednesday or Thursday, but at least we’re agreed on the season.” Said Doug.

“The Eleanor will get us safely to England, I’m sure of it.” Said Ela.

Bren hadn’t expected to see Ela on deck for a while, especially as they were keeping her knocked out with pain killers. The girl didn’t look good and Matt helped her a chair, but it still seemed to be a miracle that she’d survived her fight with the alien creature.

“You should be resting.” Said Doug.

“I can rest here.....And I couldn’t miss seeing the famous Rock of Gibraltar.”

The Mediterranean was giving way to the waters of the Atlantic, Bren could see it and feel the changes in the way the Eleanor was behaving. Darker colder water was beginning to replace the warm waters of the Mediterranean. It was a little choppy and she knew that would get worse. Of course, a weather forecast would have been nice, but like so much else, they’d gone when the aliens had arrived.

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Mateo Lopez was never that thrilled when the people from the Kingdom arrived to take away some of their produce, though the little yellow pills were useful, as was the gossip about his neighbours.

Not that anyone was that close to the farmhouse and barn their daughter had christened Big Town.

“Four days late.....They’re never late.” He said.

Helen was with him in the barn, both looking at the sacks of potatoes and turnips the Kingdom should have collected. Nothing would spoil in the sacks, at least not for a while. He’d already decided

to give it a full week. If no cart had arrived by then, the food was going back into the proper storage bins.

"More food for us.....We do have enough pills to last for several years." Said Helen.

"Still.....It is strange." He said.

Their daughter Tina had to be eleven, maybe even twelve. Their system for measuring ages by the number of summers hadn't worked too well. Tina was changing, becoming a young woman. The hyperactivity had been replaced by yet more insatiable curiosity. She was the first to bring them news of the approach of someone on horseback, someone on their own.

"Couldn't see their face." Said Tina. "She has a gun though, a rifle slung over her shoulder."

"Where's your brother?" Asked Helen.

"I told him to go to his room and stay there."

Some hopes, Tom seemed to have caught the whole curiosity thing from his big sister.

"How do you know it's a woman on the horse?" He asked.

"She's wearing a skirt."

By the time they were standing outside the farmhouse, watching the very slow progress of the horse, Tom was with them, clutching a homemade baseball bat. It was really a club, though Tom insisted it was a bat.

"Calm down everyone." Said Helen. "Ten to one it'll be a neighbour needing a hand with something or other."

"I know that grey, that horse." Said Tina. "That's Jill's horse."

"Probably with Jill on it.....Come on, she probably needs help." Said Mateo.

Jill was one of the people they'd originally thought of as muggers, the people from the Kingdom who arrived to take away the fruits of their labours. They'd grown to like them all though, especially quiet spoken Jill. It was a good idea to go to her, dismounting turned into a fall from her horse. Mateo caught her and noticed the blood on her jacket.

"She's been hurt..... You two, get her horse into the barn and make sure it's comfortable."

"But dad.....The pigs are in there." Said Tom.

"They won't mind a bit of company." Said Helen. "Do as your father said, get the saddle off the horse and give the poor creature a wipe down."

Him one side and Helen the other, they had to almost carry Jill into the house. Once she was in a chair with a glass of water, she began to talk. All the time Helen was finding another cut or abrasion on the woman and tutting as she cleaned it and applied antiseptic ointment.

"A boat arrived at Combe Martin." Said Jill. "Half the crew dead and the cabin was a smouldering pile of burnt wood. A miracle they survived what had happened to Jersey. The aliens had attacked with everything they had; the island was carpeted by their bombs. All one of the survivors could talk about was fire, an ocean of fire."

"I need to get your jacket off, I can see a few more cuts." Said Helen.

When Jill was left sitting in just her knickers and bra, he thought about giving her some privacy. Instead, he helped clean the wounds on her back, before gently applying antiseptic ointment. Only the standard domestic stuff from the first aid box, but it was all they had. Jill's back was covered in tiny cuts and a few quite nasty burns.

"Crap Jill, these burns." He said. "What happened?"

"I survived, though I'm not sure how. They must have been watching us for a while, they knew where the boats went to. The aliens craft attacked Combe Martin and our supply base further along the coast. Everything was destroyed....I saw so many of my friends die. I just kept running and found

Cinnamon still in the stables. The stables were destroyed a few moments after I left. Everything seemed to be on fire, like an ocean of fire.”

“You can stay with us.” Said Helen. “We’ll move a few things about, the kids will love it.”

Plus, Jill probably had nowhere else to go, though there was no need to remind her of that.

“We could do with an extra hand.” Said Mateo. “Now the pigs are getting bigger.”

“I can be useful on a farm, you’ll see.”

It was strange how their kids could be constantly in your face about nonsense, yet understand when to be quiet and considerate. There was Jill in her underwear, covered in splodges of pink ointment that smelled of medicine. Tom kept quiet and Tina actually held Jill’s hand.

“It’ll be alright now.” Said Tina. “You’ll see.....It’ll be alright now.”

“I know it will honey.” Said Jill.

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Deb Newman was being kept in the dark and that frustrated her. She’d been there, she’d helped unpack the specimens from the four large, heavy crates. She’d seen the containers inside the crates, containers that definitely hadn’t been created on planet Earth. They should have been examining everything, though so far; nothing seemed to be happening. The find was huge, yet it was never mentioned by Andy or included in the team brief. It was as if the find of the century, her find, had never happened. Two days away from her child, Iris and the apartment she thought of as home. Now all that seemed to have been pointless. Until Dora had requested her attendance at a part of the science lab that wasn’t on any plans she’d ever seen.

“Come to Hazard Lab H Deb, I’ll meet you there and take you to the new Delta Labs.”

The campus AI had never heard of Delta Labs and there hadn’t been time to ask Andy or Francine about it. That was the trouble with an instant request to be somewhere, there wasn’t time to check things out. Deb didn’t even take her usual backpack; Dora had told her to bring nothing with her.

“Just bring yourself Deb, your wing of the accommodation block has a rodent problem. Not that I’m judging, the whole campus has a rodent problem.” Dora had told her.

Hazard Lab H was really one vast stores, where any chemicals known to cause cancer were kept. Even humble benzene had long been known to be carcinogenic, even if it was essential to the creation of quite a few essential compounds, or at least essential to them. Deb knew Lab H had been repurposed, when she saw the line of decontamination cubicles next to the outer doors. Dora was there, waiting for her.

“Sorry for the indignity Deb, but we all go through this, sometimes several times a day.”

“A decontamination on the way in.....Why ?” Asked Deb.

“Not just mice Deb, your part of the campus accommodation has an insect problem, mainly that good old favourite, the cockroach. Did you know a cockroach can squeeze through a gap thinner than a credit card ?”

“This is crazy.”

“Maybe Deb, please humour my whims, if thinking of it that way helps. Undress completely and Sue will deal with your clothing. It’s your lucky day, I will be giving you a scrub down with Decon70.”

“And if I refuse to go along with your whims ?” She asked.

“Then you will never see the Delta Labs.”

They had her strip naked in what was effectively a corridor. True it was a corridor in the ass end of nowhere, but it still felt like stripping off in the street. After being covered from head to foot in Decon70, she showered before, still naked, she was allowed through the door into what had been

Hazard Lab H. There were clothes for her on a chair, clothes that looked far nicer than the ones she'd taken off.

"We've made a lot of changes in just a few days." Said Dora. "Lots of faces you won't know, McLaren has been busy bringing in technicians from other facilities. We needed a fully sealed off research area to handle the specimens you found."

Deb followed Dora through what had been rooms full of shelving. The store of carcinogens has been moved somewhere, she dreaded to think where. Now Hazard Lab H appeared to be the support annexe for the new Delta Labs. People were sitting on bunk beds, eating or getting dressed. Some Deb knew, but most of them looked new.

"They're all so young Dora."

"We work with what we can get."

There was no sign, but the new looking doors covered in Bio-Hazard signs had to give access to the Delta Labs. Now she was there, Deb wondered if it had been such a good idea to pester Dora quite so hard. She was there, the lab obviously dealing with her finds. She was a mother now though, with more responsibilities than apologising for the occasional inappropriate remark from Iris. The specimens were dangerous, or they wouldn't have built a special lab for them.

"Ideally I'd have liked another dozen aliens like Horace." Said Dora. "Hard to obtain though and we'd be unlikely to find another as cooperative as our existing Horace. Through these doors Deb.....And we'll be there. We'll need to suit up of course."

Hard not to be impressed with what had been accomplished so quickly. A proper dressing room to get into the hazard suits. All of the suits had MOD labels on them, almost certainly another victory for the scavengers.

"I hate to ask, but can I keep the new clothes?" Asked Deb.

"Yes, of course."

Once in the suits they were both scanned in some way Deb had never seen before. She assumed the scan found nothing, as they were allowed past two serious looking guards and into another area of the lab.

"It might all seem paranoid, but with good reason Deb. I'll show you some recordings later of the horrors suffered by the people in the Mordor Two base on lunar. We're not sure how the UniConsortium staff were infected, but we suspect it might have been a mouse getting past the seals, or even a humble cockroach. Everyone died, but not before some were turned into monsters. You have full clearance to watch all the recordings."

Deb's mind drifted with the implications of what she'd just heard. She was barely aware of Dora talking to her, as they passed through several more rooms.

"No burn rooms Deb, we don't think burning will work. The few experiments we've done show a truly aggressive DNA, with incredible healing properties. We're beginning to think in terms of a DNA with a goal, a purpose. Ish is even muttering about intelligence at a cellular level. Instead of burn rooms, we're using intense gamma radiation if the worst should happen. Intense enough to destroy living cell nuclei in seconds."

They appeared to be there, the heart of the Delta Labs. In front of her, though not quite close enough to touch, were the alien containers she'd helped to remove from the crates. It had never occurred to her before, but the shapes of the containers and their general design....

"They're beautiful." Said Deb.

“They are and thanks to Horace, we opened them without resorting to brute force. Horace is still reading all the alien writing you found, it was a mine of biotech knowledge. Come on. I’ll show you Ish’s new pet.”

Another door to yet another room. Deb began to realise that the sealed rooms inside other sealed off areas was deliberate. In the event of a catastrophe, it wasn’t intended that anyone would escape. The intense gamma would be used to turn every living thing to a mush of destroyed cells.

“We destroyed the others, but Ish has a soft spot for this little guy.” Said Dora.

“Crap ! Aren’t they tough enough already ?” Asked Deb.

It had once been a cockroach, that much was obvious. Still the basic cockroach shape, but larger and the way it moved away from them....Deb might have been biased, she hated bugs, but it seemed to be intelligent for a bug.

“We cut off the air and it adapts; we don’t feed it and it doesn’t seem worried.” Said Dora. “Too soon to be sure, but we suspect it could survive anywhere, with even more success than the famous tardigrades. It learns too and Ish thinks it might be self-aware. All from inserting a little DNA from one of the containers you found in Manchester.”

“Did you name it ?”

“Ish calls it Fluff, but we both know he can be a little eccentric.”

Definitely not a Fluff, the DNA modified cockroach ran to the top of some rocks in its tank. It was observing them with much the same intensity as they were observing it. As she watched it began chewing at the rocks.

“Amazingly adaptable, it can eat just about anything, maybe even Twinkie bars.” Said Dora.

“It might learn to eat the sides of the tank.”

“If it tries, we nuke it.”

The thing in the tank had at least a dozen legs, maybe even more. Deb realised that had to be part of what Dora called the aggressive DNA. Ever changing, ever replicating DNA. A teacher when she was at nursing school had a theory that humans didn’t really matter as individuals. All that mattered was the survival of our ever changing ever replicating DNA.

“If Fifth West created this thing’s DNA, why haven’t we heard of it ?” Asked Deb.

“I’m not trying to insult the UniConsortium team, they’ve worked wonders. Ask JV and he insists all the research was sent off world to the moon bases. Everything handed over to someone called Dimitri Minasyan. JV claims to have no idea what happened after that.”

“That sounds like crap.”

“Careful Deb, no saying that in front of the new people, they’re skittish enough already. Personally I agree with you, but that stays between us. Imagine if Baron Frankenstein became the respected head of a large corporation. Would he be happy to talk about building his creature ?”

“So, you think Fifth West are responsible for this..... Abomination ?” Asked Deb.

“Not entirely, no I don’t. Many thousands of years ago the aliens began some sort of terraforming operation on Earth. For all we know several different alien races may have come here. At some point they began to alter the DNA of certain animals and plants, probably to use them as a food supply. For some reason the terraforming was abandoned, but eventually human explorers found the alien containers. Move history forward a few centuries and.....”

“Scientists managed to get at the specimens in the containers.” Said Deb.

“Exactly.”

Deb looked at the super cockroach, as it followed her every move. As she stepped to the left, it moved to watch her. Just a single DNA altered cockroach had her feeling nervous. Just supposing there were thousands of them.

“So Dora, what are you and Ish going to create with this DNA ?” She asked.

“We’re still in the evaluation phase, which you can help with. It obviously has potential as a weapon, though primarily we see it as something to help mankind survive on other worlds. Why terraform a new world when you can alter your DNA to live comfortably with how it already is ? Then we might be able to make the survivors of mankind on this planet, immune to the green death. Dropping notes out of aircraft and leaving parcels of the little yellow pills isn’t efficient. We can only cover bits of England, let alone the rest of the world. The possibilities are endless Deb.”

“And a bit scary.”

“Oh yes, definitely a bit scary.”

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None of them would probably have survived, if it hadn’t been for Maria playing with the local kids. There were tunnels and bunkers on the west side of Jersey, forgotten relics of a war with Germany that was now nothing more than a few chapters in the history of Europe. Maria had been told not to play in the dangerous ruins, but kids will always be kids.

After packing what they could carry the Lopez family were homeless wanderers again, hiding in tunnels built to withstand bombing by the allies in World War II. Maria had collected a boy her own age on the way, a boy called Billy. They still had no idea who Billy belonged to.

“You must have a family Billy; someone will be worried about you.” Said Daisy.

“He was staying with the Chase family, they left him behind.” Said Maria.

Steve Penboss wasn’t about to hold that against Jessica Chase and her family, being in a bombardment meant general chaos and more than a little confusion. By the time Steve had thought about talking to their upstairs neighbours, the chase family had packed and gone. Probably heading towards the harbour, hoping to get a place on a boat. Luckily Maria must have realised poor Billy had been left behind. The boy was sobbing and refusing to talk.

“Don’t worry Billy, we’ll look after you.” Said Steve.

If anything Billy’s sobs became louder. Steve didn’t blame the kid; the Lopez family weren’t likely to inspire anyone to look on the bright side of life. Jada had seen her husband killed by a street thug. After a while the shock of that had set in and now, she was barely articulate, full zombie mode as Daisy had whispered to him. Alejandro wasn’t much better, he too had watched his father, Luis, hacked to death by the leader of a hate filled mob. Out of all the Lopez family, only Tracy seemed to be all there and firing on all cylinders.

“We haven’t got much food and water.” Said Daisy.

“Tomorrow, after the bombing stops.” Said Steve. “We can go looking for food tomorrow.”

Not really a window, part of the passage wall had collapsed outwards, taking the soil and grass with it. It gave them a narrow window to see the ocean and the flashes of regular explosions. They felt the vibrations too, a close bomb made dirt fall onto Steve’s head. They’d had brought flashlights, but only a fool uses a flashlight during a night time bombing raid.

“Any ideas what we do next Steve ?” Asked Tracy. “We can’t hide in these tunnels forever.”

Steve had worked as a DJ for as long as he could remember. Good regular work, he’d had his own mobile disco for a while, complete with flashing lights and a music synthesiser. No one had ever expected him to be a hero though, or come up with a plan to save their lives. It seemed though, that if he didn’t come up with something, no one else would.

“Most people will have headed for the harbours, but there are boats moored all along the coast.” He said.

Tempting to add that the bombing was likely to have thinned out the numbers looking for boats, though he didn't think it was appropriate to mention it.

“We find a boat with enough fuel to get us to France or England.” He said.

“How will we know where to go ?” Asked Maria.

“Easy Maria.....Go south and we'll run into France.” Said Steve. “Go north and we'll run into England, eventually.”

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Feral humans had been more of a problem than the alien creatures. Lianne had followed the directions and suggestions of her father, even though Barwood often thought they were taking too many risks. There had been a few small greens in a train maintenance yard where they'd found enough copper wire to finish The Nostromo and still have plenty left over. So far though it was the sad remnants of mankind who'd given them the most problems. One ferocious looking man in some sort of uniform, had badly bitten two of the soldiers.

“Dirty disgusting things.....Their bites are certain to become infected.”

Someone had said at the time, she wasn't sure who. Lianne actually found it sad to have to fight and kill fellow humans, even if they were crazy. Maybe going crazy was the right thing to do and the ferals were the only truly sane humans left on the planet ? Barwood would never understand how she felt, he was a typical career soldier. Nigel might, but they had other things on their minds when they were alone.

“Please Lianne.....This goes well beyond being a bit risky.” Said Sgt Barwood.

The Vasileostrovsky District of St Petersburg was an Island, connected to the rest of the city by several bridges. Once a centre for the arts and humanities, with several world-famous museums. For a decade though, the science students had begun moving into the district, with the places of learning following them.

“My father gave me direction to a workshop near the west of the district, close to Grammar School 586. He said all the microprocessors I need can be found there, even the fluid cooled 15th Gen stuff.” They were close to the bridge linking the island to the city, quite close to St. Isaac's Cathedral. The cathedral was just a ruin, though still just about recognisable. As for the condition of the Vasileostrovsky District ? Parts of it were nothing but ruins, but there seemed less destruction on the western side of the island, the side where St Petersburg ended at the ocean.

“I'm only thinking of your safety.” Said Barwood. “An island is a bad place to get trapped, especially if the other bridges have been destroyed. We need to at least use the drone to look at the bridges.”

It made sense, but there were a lot of bridges. Lianne thought it was unlikely that they'd had the good fortune to find the only one that was still standing. Lately their luck had never been that good.

“If their satellites are looking at the city, the drone will lead them straight to us.” She said. “I've made my mind up, we're crossing the bridge.”

“As you wish, but.....”

“Yes, your warning is duly noted.”

The bridge was about two hundred metres long, with three lanes going each way. For most vehicles the burnt-out cars on the bridge would have made it impassable, but their APCs weren't like most vehicles. There was room to get behind the wrecks and push them out of the way, one ended up being pushed off the bridge and into the water below. The soldiers in the APC cheered, but of course Barwood had to spoil the moment.

“Every street will be the same, full of wrecked cars.” He said. “If we’re not careful we’ll find ourselves boxed in and easy to attack.”

“Then we’ll have to be careful.” She said.

Students liked their junk food it seemed, even in Russia. The first few buildings they drove past were fast food restaurants. All ruined of course, though the delicious aromas still remained in a few places.

“Great, now I feel hungry.” Said Nigel.

Some streets were fairly wide and free of abandoned vehicles, while others were a nightmare. They had to use a chain connected to the front of the APC, to pull one wreck away from a corner where they needed to turn a little east of north. It took them nearly three hours to travel just over a kilometre and of course, although she hated to admit it, it was a dreadful place to get trapped. The secret of course was not to get trapped.

All the streets looked the same, the buildings still standing were identical. At one point they gave up on the roads and drove along wide footpaths. As usual Lianne preferred to look through one of the flaps, rather than relying on the screens.

“This is the new academic area, we’re in the right place.” She said. “It’s no good, I need to get a good look outside.....Stop the vehicle.....Now, stop.”

Lots of soldiers telling her to be careful, Barwood looked genuinely worried, rather the official look of worry that seemed glued to his face. Worry on faces turning to horror, as she began to use the metal rungs that would get her on top of their APC.

“Leave me alone, I need to see where we are ?” She yelled.

“Use the drone.” Said Nigel.

“The drone is like a huge sign, saying here we are.”

Eventually she was on the roof of the APC, a borrowed pair of decent field glasses in her hands. They were so close to the where she wanted to be that she forced herself not to say anything until she was certain.

“We’re there, I can see the bright red receiver dish my dad mentioned.”

The building looked fairly intact, with just a few signs of destruction near the courtyard side. It was where she’d find everything according to her father, including the weaponry to upgrade The Nostromo’s offensive capability.

“What is it, a college of some kind ?” Asked Barwood.

“Yes, officially Electronics School 1707, though really they were researching advanced weaponry. We’re there Sgt Barwood, my father was right.”

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