

Ishmael

Chapter 25 - Nomads

“It looked as though a small moon was trying to land near Manchester. The sphere was still glowing with the heat of entering the atmosphere. Huge, massive almost beyond comprehension. To add to the misery for any humans left alive, batteries of energy weapons began to batter the ground.”



Matt Newman hadn't expected many of them to survive the attack on the alien landing site. He still had absolute faith that he'd survive, which his mind refused to treat as confused thinking. They'd probably all die, but he was going to survive and travel across the globe to England. Somewhere deep down he could see the contradiction. He just wasn't going to let his mind dwell on it. A very dusty looking Brenda Grundy was knelt next to him, relaying orders to the team leaders.

“Duncan in the APC has to get through, that's the number one priority.” Said Bren. “He has the explosives.”

The aim always had been to damage the structure so it couldn't be used. Any notion of capturing the landing site was nonsense. They didn't have enough troops to hold the structure, even if they could force a way through the hundreds of robot lizards and static laser weapons.

“Keep it simple Bren.” He said. “Tell them to clear a path for the APC. That's their main order, the one thing that matters.”

They'd probably lost half the soldiers. He'd lost half the soldiers. It was hard to be certain, but going by the number of bodies littering the dry sandy ground, it had to be about half. His soldiers weren't fools; they'd know that few of them were likely to make it home.

“Tell them Duncan and the APC need to get through Bren.” He said.

“They know Matt, I've told them and they understand.” She replied.

“We should help.” He said.

Finding the APC wasn't hard; nearly all his soldiers were formed up in front of it, trying to punch a hole through the alien defences. Less strange bio-hybrids now and more metal men robots. The Fifth West weapons dealt with them fairly easily, or would have done if there weren't so many.

Thousands of robots advanced towards them, with more appearing out of the ground all the time. It was as if they'd kicked the nest of angry fire ants.

“Unless you plan on taking the bus south, we should get near the front and be seen.” He said.

“I think we missed the last bus.” Said Bren. “I'm hoping Owen made it with the civilians.”

“So do I. If anyone can find local settlements to hide in, it's Owen.” Said Matt.

The APC was holding back a bit, trying to avoid the worst parts of the battle. Keeping back a little was sensible, but whoever was driving the vehicle was overdoing it.

“Tell the APC to move forward Bren.” He said. “If they keep too far away, we can't give them protection.”

Even in battle, other sounds hit the unconscious mind. Matt found himself wondering why the endless squawking of sea birds had stopped. The wind was picking up too, the temperature dropping like a stone.

“Do you feel that ?” He asked.

“Fuck ! Look..... They’ve arrived.”

So huge that his mind refused to accept what his eyes were seeing. A sphere shaped vessel, but not a perfect sphere. It was above the clouds, flying through the clouds and yet still appeared to be low enough to see structures on the parts closest to them. The vessel designed to land on the alien structure was above them, coming in to land.

“Bren, tell everyone to.....” He began.

The huge vessel having weapons shouldn’t have surprised him, but it did. The energy weapon struck down, blowing the APC apart, setting off the explosives inside. If the driver hadn’t kept so far back, Matt would have been killed. Brenda too probably. As it was the blast from the explosion blew them both some distance, leaving them covered in rubble and loose earth. He could see Bren was alright and the heavy comms unit she moaned about, still had green lights.

“Give them a last order Bren.” He said. “Retreat to the south. Meet up at the base of Hill India Echo. Get them all to confirm the order.”

Very few of the team leaders confirmed the order. They weren’t being awkward or insubordinate. Matt knew they were probably dead, gone to join Duncan and the explosives team in the APC. He helped Bren get to her feet.

“Leave the comms here, it’s useless now and will just enable their drones to find us.”

“Are you sure Matt ?”

“Yes I am.....We’ll get to Hill India Echo and wait for whoever survived to arrive.”

“Supposing HQ want a report on the attack ?” Asked Bren.

He took the comms unit off her, turning it off, before throwing it on the ground.

“We’re heading south Bren and I don’t know about you, but I just resigned from being a soldier.”

“Are you going to take me to England with you ?”

“If you like.”

Hill India Echo was just a bump in the ground about five miles to the south. It had been marked on everyone’s maps as a rallying point, somewhere to link up in the event of a failed mission. Or if they were running from angry aliens after wrecking the landing site. About ten soldiers were there before them and all looked to be wounded in some way. All of them were looking up into the sky.

“Christ.” Said Bren, as she turned. “There must be millions of them in that thing.”

The sphere had landed, yet the top eighth of it was still protruding up into the clouds. Large numbers of drones now patrolled the sky around the huge spacecraft, protecting it like angry wasps. As Matt looked out across the dry soil of that part of the Northern Territories, he could see his men making their way to Hill India Echo. Most were walking, but few seemed to be walking that well. Like old men, most were stooped, limping as best they could.

“Wave to them.” Matt shouted. “Come on, that’s an order...Wave to them, show them where we are. It’s old tech but it works.....Wave to them.”

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Ishmael McGrath had a wonderful view of the invasion they’d all known was on the way. From the windows of a fast helicopter, the entire night sky was visible. Like a huge firework display, the alien craft hit the atmosphere, decelerating to land.

“I’d actually be enjoying this, if it didn’t mean the arrival of so much death and destruction.” He said. He’d thought the present from Horace would kick in when the main fleet arrived. The tiny extra piece of tissue attached to his brain stem was quiet though, which was a bit disappointing. The helicopter changed course a little, heading more towards the east.

“Not long now.” Said the pilot. “The fires to the west are in Manchester.....Poor bastards.”

"They've more trouble on the way." Said Biff.

"Can that really land here?" Asked Inka.

It looked as though a small moon was trying to land near Manchester. The sphere was still glowing with the heat of entering the atmosphere. Huge, massive almost beyond comprehension. To add to the misery for any humans left alive, batteries of energy weapons began to batter the ground.

"Do you think they can see us?" Asked Kata.

"Don't worry, they'll be working to a plan that doesn't include a few people in a helicopter." Said Biff

A huge flare of energy lit up the sky for long enough for them to see the huge sphere begin to land.

Their pilot turned even further to the east and descended slightly.

"Getting out of their way seems a good idea." He said.

No one said anything else, until the pilot told them they'd be landing in Filey in less than ten minutes. The sky to the south west still seemed to be full of fire.

"We can't win against them." Said Kata.

So easy to agree with her, until he saw the look in her eyes. Kata was still a child, despite having grown up feelings for Darius, and her brother was even younger. He owed her a little hope, a little light at the end of the tunnel.

"I wouldn't write us off yet Kata." He said. "Andy Korenberg is meeting us in Filey and he seems to be a very clever man. He thinks outside the box as they say. He's had a few good ideas about how we can survive the invasion. Better than survive, the human race can thrive."

"How?" Asked Inka Malovic.

"Fifth West have already put thousands of people into bunkers." Said Biff.

"I don't want to live in a hole in the ground." Said Kata.

"No, their bunkers are comfortable places, designed to be used for hundreds of years." Said Biff.

"Supposing the aliens decide to stay forever?" Asked Inka.

It was the obvious point, the reason for Andy deciding to put all of Fifth West's best people onto the rocket building programme, the creation of Diaspora 8 craft. All still officially a huge secret, but he thought a few hints to the Malovics couldn't hurt.

"Andy has other ideas." Said Ish. "There's a plan to gain a whole new world for us, perhaps many new worlds. That's one of the reasons why he's coming to Filey."

"You mean we'd use spaceships?" Asked Kata. "Like in Star Trek?"

He'd probably already said too much and Biff was giving him an odd look. What the hell though, Inka and her kids weren't likely to tell the aliens, and the pilot was busy with getting ready to land.

"Can you keep a secret Kata? You too Antun."

"Yes." Said Antun.

Kata just nodded at him, an excited look in her eyes.

"There are rockets, but they need quite a lot of work to get them ready." He said. "We'll need to be quiet and keep hidden while we get ready to leave for a new home."

"A better home?" Asked Kata.

A question he hadn't anticipated, but with the current resources problem and shortage of decent jobs. Ish had no hesitation in answering her.

"Yes Kata, it will be a better home."

"I hope you're not promising my children pie in the sky?" Said Inka.

"No, he'd never do that." Said Biff. "There are rockets and once they're ready, we will be leaving Earth to travel to a new planet, a new home."

The look on Inka's kid's faces took away any doubt he'd had about telling them.

"Just like in Star Trek." Muttered Kata.

"Cool." Said Antun.

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Jaroslav Verga tended to keep on the move, setting up his mobile headquarters in out of the way and isolated places. He felt a bit guilty dragging his daughter Lianne around the globe with him, but she'd refused to leave him. He picked up a flat stone and skimmed it over the calm waters of the lake.

"You're getting better at that." Said Lianne.

"I was thinking of bringing a table out here and watching them arrive over dinner. Good idea or a bad one?" He asked.

"A bit.....Is Titanic a word? Well it should be. A bit too Titanic, but yes.....I'll ask the guards to set up our dinner table out here."

"We'll need thick coats and the food will go cold." He said.

"Don't try to backtrack now dad, I love the idea of an alfresco dinner in Southern Sweden."

A lake in Southern Sweden, though he couldn't remember the name of it. Life was like that when you kept on the move, names of places became unimportant. The important thing was the lake's isolation and that he'd never been there before. No pattern in his movements for the aliens to learn. It was cold of course, but not so cold that eating outside was impossible. He skimmed another stone, getting it to bounce four times before sinking.

"There's supposed to be a dragon in the lake." Said Lianne. "Don't wake it up."

"With the sky full of alien craft, a mere dragon doesn't scare me."

It was probably the biggest and best free lightshow in the history of the planet. An almost uncountable number of asteroids were hitting the atmosphere, causing multi-coloured trails of fire. The larger craft caused what looked like walls of flame in the upper atmosphere, as they used friction with the atmosphere to slow down.

"Every operational base is filming the invasion Dad. Everyone, all around the globe."

"Good, the numbers and analysis will be useful."

He had good people and the best AI in the world. The pictures of the invasion would give a good idea of the number of craft arriving and the space available for crews and cargos. Only rough numbers, but it would give a good guesstimate of how many aliens had arrived and how much equipment arrived with them. There would always be the worry though.....Was this invasion just one wave out of many yet to arrive?

"Ahh yes, sorry Knowles, we've decided to watch the sky while we eat." He said.

For some reason it felt colder when he was sat at the table, enjoying a plate of vegetable soup. His fingers were a bit stiff from the cold, but he was reasonably comfortable.

"What if there is no cure or antidote to the green gas?" Asked Lianne.

"There has to be, simple as that." He said. "The Diaspora 8 fleet won't be ready for at least a year. We really are relying on Pandora and Ishmael to solve the problem with the toxic gas."

"But what if there is no solution? Do we go into one of the bunkers?"

His daughter's hand was trembling and he was sure it had nothing to do with the cold. He held her hand, trying to give her comfort and a little warmth.

"No, we will use Andy's rockets." He said. "From my experience if there really needs to be a solution to a problem, someone will find it. You need to believe that Ish and Dora will find a way to beat the green gas."

"I'll try dad."

“Good.”

He saw a huge alien space craft move and catch a little moonlight. A craft big enough to hold millions of enemy fighters and their weapons.

“I’ll give the aliens one thing.” He said. “They definitely know how to put on a show.”

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Deb Newman hadn’t expected to be asked to attend the big secret meeting. To be honest she didn’t see what she could bring to the table. Iris hadn’t been asked, which was causing all sorts of problems. Thelma to her Louise, the old lady had used the ‘I’m going to go anyway,’ ploy.

“They can hardly throw me out.”

When Francine Lazan, the base commander in Filey had told Iris that throwing her out wasn’t an option, because she’d never make it through the door.....Iris had tried several other ploys. Threats, claiming to be at death’s door, even a new and impressive limp. Even the flushing toilet had lost its ability to make Iris Bouvard smile.

“I’m not sure how long this will take.” Said Deb. “Are you going to be alright ?”

“Yes, don’t worry about me. I’m sure you’re right, the pain in my chest probably isn’t my heart.”

There had been so many rows that Deb thought Iris might die to spite her.

“That’s it Iris, always look on the bright side.”

“Wait until you get to my age.”

There was electric light, entertainment on the internal network, food in a refrigerator and that wonderful flushing toilet. Compared to how they had been living, the Filey campus was a paradise. Deb closed the door to the apartment she shared with Iris and headed towards the main building.

“Can I walk with you ?” Asked Rick Piotroski. “I know there’s a moon, I’m just not used to the campus being under a complete blackout.”

“You should try surviving out there for a while.” She replied. “The night before coming here, Iris and I stayed in a damp room above a cat hotel.”

Deb liked the Filey campus systems guy. He was down to earth, no nonsense about titles and status. Like all the senior people at the Fifth West facility, he did seem to have had an easy war, so far.

“I knew that cat hotel when it was full of pampered pets.” Said Rick.

The reason for the blackout was filling the sky. The invasion had been going on for so long that Deb had stopped looking up into the sky. The feelings of fear and dread were still there though.

“So many of them arriving.” She said. “Makes you wonder how many millions of them are arriving to wipe us out, or whatever they’re here to do.”

“Andy will talk about that at the meeting.” Said Rick. “And he has a few ideas to avoid being wiped out. Have you been inside the hangars before ?”

“No, I didn’t know there were any. Do we have aircraft here ?”

“Andy doesn’t appreciate having his surprises ruined. We can take the quick route there though and avoid the crowd using the Research and Development entrance.”

“Can we do that ?” She asked.

“Of course we can.”

It felt like being at college again, giggling about using the back way in and beating the queue. The rear entrance to the hangars didn’t mention a hangar or aircraft.

‘Diaspora Project.’

Said the sign above the serious looking blast doors. Two armed guards, who ran facial recognition scanners over their faces. It was her first time in the research area, which meant quite a bit of extra

fuss and checking. Eventually they seemed happy that she was who she claimed to be, and on the guest list.

"Have a nice evening." Said the guard, as he let them through.

"We can't ruin the surprise." Said Rick. "We'll need to use the hangar doors near where Andy brought the VIPs. Come on, the accelerator tunnels will get us there."

"Accelerator tunnels !?"

"Don't worry, it's never running at this time of night."

The tunnels only had emergency lighting and pieces of machinery left in inconvenient places. They had to move slowly, or risk injury.

"Not far." Said Rick.

Ten minutes of playing avoid the health and safety hazards and they were through a door and into what looked like a weapon store.

"Cut through weapon testing and we're there."

She stopped and Rick had to walk back a little.

"Wouldn't it be easier to use the front way?" She asked. "Probably a lot safer too."

"It's not far now..... Honestly. You'll get to meet the great man before everyone else has dibs on his time. Unless you fancy queuing just to shake his hand?"

She was in the right, yet he was making her sound a bit churlish. She really did want to meet Andy though and the people from Base Albion.

"Alright.....Lead on Macduff."

"That's actually a common misquote of....."

She glared at him, what Matt called her blow torch look.

"Fine, fine..... Soon be there." Said Rick.

Weapon testing was eerily quiet. Deb guessed that everyone who was anyone was probably in the queue to meet Andy Korenberg. Lots of dummies at the end of shooting galleries, some made to look like ordinary men and women. She hadn't expected to see that kind of thing in an educational research campus.

"Some of this looks a bit paramilitary Rick."

"It'll all make sense once you've heard about diaspora, the great plan."

Several more doors and a large sliding door with a guard in front of it. Luckily he smiled when he saw Rick and pressed a button to open the door.

"Don't freak out Deb.....This is quite a shock to some people."

The bright lights dazzled her after the low lighting everywhere else they'd been. She realised the lights were high above her, very high above her. Rick was talking, but all her attention was being taken up by the craft in the hangar.

".....Most are Diaspora 8 vessels....."

She tuned Rick out, not quite believing a mile long hangar in North Yorkshire was home to spacecraft that looked like something out of a SciFi film. Most were the same size, but a few were far larger. Nearly all of them seemed incomplete and still under construction.

"..... Used to be a government fissile materials store until Fifth West took it over and enlarged it....."

Rick droning on, though little of what he was saying made it through to her conscious mind. She'd heard of the now defunct Area 51. A construction hangar so large that it had its own weather pattern up near the top of the roof. The hangar in Filey looked bigger, much, much.....Much bigger.

"You knew !" She yelled. "You had to know about the invasion, or you wouldn't have built all this."

"Probabilities, sensible risk assessment.....That's all."

The voice sounded friendly and he was holding a hand out to be shaken.

"I'm Andy Korenberg."

She shook his hand.

"Deborah Newman.... You must have known to build all these.....All these lifeboats."

If he took offence at being called a liar, he hid it well. Andy still had a smile on his face.

"Your high street bank looks at the risk of a jet hitting its main computer complex, or some of the board being kidnapped. At Fifth West we look at a far larger picture. There has been a credible risk from alien worlds for quite some time. We prepared for it. Sadly not quickly enough, the craft you can see all still need a lot of work."

"There are so many of them." She said.

"And many more in underground workshops all over the world. Sadly only enough for a small part of the human race. There's someone here who is very eager to meet you Deborah."

What had to be the survivors of Base Albion, in their smart Fifth West uniforms. Quite near them were a boy and girl, probably no more than twenty years of age. The boy came towards her, reaching to shake her hand. He didn't say 'come in mighty traveller on the road less travelled. Your arrival was foretold to us', but it was almost as good.

"Hi Deb, I'm Ishmael McGrath."

"I knew that, though don't ask me how."

"Yes..... I feel it too. You have to meet Pandora."

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The creature that had been Vicky had died after being exposed to the near perfect vacuum on the lunar surface. It wasn't just Vicky though, or cells from the DNA compromised mouse that had bitten her. The mouse had managed to get through vents and chew on samples in what were supposed to be totally secure areas of Mordor Two. Life still clung to the creature once called Vicky. Life is tenacious, life is persistent, life refuses to be beaten.

The dead thing moved a little and realised it wasn't quite dead. Memories of Vicky filled its mind, as its compromised DNA moved, changed, and filled its bloodstream with a fluid that didn't require oxygen to supply energy for growth and repair. No voice, but the creature once called Vicky now had thoughts and memories. Some were the memories of a senior science officer, a Dimitri Minasyan. Other memories were terrible, violent, terrifying and totally non-human.

The dead thing that was no longer dead, stood up.

A long muscular prehensile tail helped her stand upright. Some of her was quite mouse like, but not the jaw full of teeth, or the muscular back. She'd eaten quite well, feasting on the bodies of those she'd killed. Her body was burning protein to provide energy for movement, she instinctively understood that. Not just her needing food, there were her seven babies to think about now.

The creature began to look for food.

Some form of parthenogenesis, breeding without fertilisation. The creature didn't know or care about how it had happened. Like all expectant mothers, she just cared about the children she carried, wanting to do what was best for them. A good find, two almost complete human bodies in amongst the ruins. She stripped them out of their atmosphere suits and consumed everything apart from the thickest bones. The creature who'd once been called Vicky wasn't a fussy eater. She even enjoyed chewing on the finger bones for a while. Eventually there was no food left to find in the ruins of Mordor Two.

She climbed out of the crater, blinking in the bright sunlight.

Her babies would need food and a way of getting to somewhere with more food, lots of food. Mordor One wasn't too far away, but it had no shuttles left. Memories surfaced from somewhere, she seemed to ingest them with the muscles and sinews of those she fed on. The Chinese Mao Zedong Base had been huge, room for five hundred researchers and support staff. It had long ago gone silent, assumed wiped out by the aliens invasion. It was underground though, less likely to be blown apart by sudden decompression. There would be supplies there, she could eat just about anything. Best of all there was likely to be a working shuttle.

The creature now thinking of itself as Vicky, began to walk towards the Mao Zedong Base. A long walk, a very long walk. Her babies would be born soon after arriving there. They'd be able to help her dig and get deep into the base. There had to be a working shuttle.

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~ The End ~

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Not really the end of course, just a natural place to break for book II. Book two will be called Ishmael II : Pandora, and it will begin in the autumn of 2020.