

Ishmael II : Pandora

Chapter 13 – Tempus Fugit

“The alien Bio-Bots took for ever to die and until the day they finally did stop moving, they were a constant threat. Like mines in a battlefield, they were likely to be killing people long after the real war was over. If it wasn’t over already.”



Helen Lopez had decided it was true, no one liked paying taxes. As she watched Mateo load some of their harvest onto a cart, she had a tightness, a pain in her stomach that refused to go away. It wasn't enough of their harvest to leave them hungry, unless the coming winter was a particularly bad one. She walked over to their barn with a tray holding a jug of homemade lemonade.

“Stop for minute, it’s a warm day.” She said to Mateo. “You must need this.”

“Thank you, you’re a lifesaver.”

She stroked the two horses who probably had to pull the cart all over Devon, maybe even a part of Cornwall too. No sugar cubes, they’d all gone nearly a year before. She had an apple for each horse in her pocket, which they seemed to enjoy.

“Any of that lemonade left for us ?”

“Of course Ted, that why I brought two extra glasses.”

Ted always arrived on the cart, for all she knew he owned it. Sometimes he brought Vernon with him as a helper, but usually, as on that day, it was Jill. They both eagerly filled glasses with the sweet, sticky liquid.

“Hmmmmmm, best in Devon.” Said Jill.

There had been a few fights with the Kingdom of Devon and Cornwall, even a standoff once with both sides pointing guns at one another. Nothing serious had come of it, though it had been a close thing. Helen had a scar on her right cheek from one fight and Mateo had a slight limp, but one of the Kingdom’s people had eventually died of their injuries. In the end it was a choice between leaving everything and running away, or becoming loyal subjects of the Kingdom. With two rapidly growing kids to consider, it hadn’t been a hard choice to make.

“Are you alright for the pills ?” Asked Ted.

“We’ve enough for a while, we only take them once every six months.” Said Mateo. “Both our kids feel bad after taking them.”

“Yeah, my youngest has really bad guts for a week after taking one.” Said Jill. “Still.... Better than dying.”

“If you have any to spare, a few extra never hurts.” Said Helen.

Ted counted out eight of the yellow pills from a plastic container with a mixed herbs label, everything was reused. With the pills Helen had in a tin in their kitchen, they had enough to last two years, maybe three if they left it a bit longer between doses.

“I’m still not convinced these things do anything.” Said Ted.

“No weird deaths since we started taking them.” Said Jill. “That’s good enough for me.”

For Helen the medication fell into the it can’t hurt category of life, which had the minor flaw that for some people, there were aches and pains, sometimes quite severe pain. Tina had once vomited for three straight days. Though Jill was right, it was better than dying.

“Have you time to eat with us ?” Asked Helen. “There’s apple pie for dessert.”

“We can make time.” Said Ted.

Relations with the Kingdom were good now; they’d even sent a few people to help them get the barn in good repair. You can never really like people who demand a tax from you, but the little yellow pills certainly made up for the loss of a few bags of wheat and apples.

There had been a few weird deaths in the outlying farms, even they saw the occasional visiting neighbour and picked up a little gossip. The pills had stopped the deaths, the pills being given out by Fifth West. The Kingdom distributed them far and wide, though everyone knew where they’d come from.

“Come on, the meal will get cold.” Said Helen.

Meals were good for picking up news, they’d only found out about the piglets because Vernon had mentioned them while eating his third slice of rhubarb pie. Widow Billings had swapped help getting her harvest in for three of her piglets and just like that, the Lopez family were in the pig fattening business again. Despite them all loving him Otis had become their meat for the previous winter, a neighbour had even helped them cure some of the meat with salt and herbs. Half of Otis had gone to another neighbour, in exchange for a few sacks of seed potatoes.

Paying taxes sucked, it sucked big time and sometimes Helen missed their family being cut off from the outside world. Experiences in the bunker had shown her how bad communal living could be. On the whole though, she had to admit that life as part of the Kingdom, was far better than life outside of the Kingdom.

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Deb Newman found the clinic was taking up so much of her time, that there was little time to enjoy her favourite hobby. Looting some might call it; there were still lots of useful supplies to be had and the occasional treasure. Deb preferred to think of it as repurposing, recycling or even liberating essential supplies. When some free time finally arrived, she’d taken Iris back to a place they both knew, though Iris was less than thrilled.

“This place Deb ? It was damp and dangerous the last time we were here.”

“I know there was one here Iris, it looked like an old antique. Part of some kind of display, I had to move it to get to boxes of cat food.”

“Please dear, don’t remind me I once ate cat food.” Said Iris.

“From what I remember, we ate worse than that.”

The cat hotel wasn’t far from the Filey Campus, about ten miles down the main road heading south. They’d slept there once, just for one night. That had been when their transport was a pedal driven rickshaw and cat food was a real find, almost a treat. It was so much nicer to have driven there in a Fifth West armoured APC, with their lunch in a cool box.

The hotel had once charged owners a small fortune to look after their spoiled feline friends. A real kitty home from home, if you could afford it.

“There’s a small green on the wall. Very likely in the process of dying.” Said Deb. “A long way from the door though and fairly harmless.”

“They make me edgy....Please kill it.”

The old electro blaster type weapons had been quite bulky, but a Fifth West base in Spain had come up with a handgun sized version. A base everyone had assumed destroyed by the aliens, until a few data bursts had started up again. The gun version didn’t have quite the same punch as the larger model, but it got the job done. Deb fired once and the small green fell off the wall. Dead, completely dead, not even a few final twitches.

“Urrggh horrible things, they make my skin itch.” Said Iris.

There had been an outside door, one covered in quite good paintings of cats. The door was still there, though it was now lying flat on the ground. Deb used her flashlight to look inside the reception area, which had still been fairly undamaged when they’d last been there.

“It’s that hole in the roof Iris.....Everywhere is damp and sodden.”

“Must be what ? Two years since we were here.”

“More like a little over three, you were eighty six then and now.....”

“I do wish you’d stop reminding me of my colossal age Deb.”

They’d found food of a sort and shelter in the cat hotel on their last visit. They’d also found the dead body of someone in the upstairs toilet. It had all looked so much nicer then though, less.....damp.

“Are you sure you want to use something from this place ?” Asked Iris.

“A good scrub and tons of disinfectant, you’ll see. I might even use a bottle of Decon70 on it.”

Getting upstairs meant using the stairs which had been rickety three years before. No good asking Iris to wait for her, that never worked. Deb’s flashlight picked up something shimmering on a banister rail.

“Firing again Iris, we’ve got another dying bad guy.”

The alien Bio-Bots took for ever to die and until the day they finally did stop moving, they were a constant threat. Like mines in a battlefield, they were likely to be killing people long after the real war was over. If it wasn’t over already. Deb fired at what was probably a small green and was rewarded by seeing its dead body tumble down the stairs.

“You’re really sure you want Ramsay to sleep in something from this place ?”

“Yes I am.”

Deb never trusted any alien creatures, not even dead ones. She used the leg of a metal chair to shove the dead small green off the stairs. She then walked up the stairs, using her flashlight to examine every inch of the walls and ceilings.

“Follow me up if you’re coming.....Keep close.” She said.

It was a ridiculous risk to take for a crib, a grubby old crib that might have been a cat bed. Her son Ramsay was approaching four months old though and in need of a proper crib. Educational campuses tend not to supply things like cribs, so her son was sleeping in a large hardwood drawer Deb had found during another recycling expedition. Were cribs tiny and cots the larger child’s bed she’d seen in the cat hotel ? Not that it really mattered. Crib or cot, her son was quickly outgrowing the drawer he currently slept in.

“Can you see it ?” Asked Iris.

“Not yet.....It’s in the next room on the left, I’d swear to it.”

A cot, definitely a large cot that Ramsay would take a long time to outgrow. Then she’d pass it on to another new mother. It looked better than she’d remembered and there was no sign of water damage. An antique, there was a definite Victorian look to it. Or it was a darn good copy, which was just as good. Even the kittens and flowers painted on the side looked original, rather than an addition by the cat hotel’s artist.

“It looks good....Full of cat food pouches though.” Said Iris. “I bet it smells bad.”

“Lots of scrubbing Iris.....It’ll just need a lot of scrubbing.”

Deb scooped out the foil cat food containers and about half had either burst or been nibbled at, probably by rats. The mess had dried out a lot, but her hands came out stinking of rotting cat food. As for the cot ? It had a bad odour to it, but nothing a bottle of Decon70 wouldn’t cure.

"I suppose you want me to help carry it down the stairs." Said Iris. "Art should be here to help, the child's father."

"I'll do you a deal old friend." Said Deb. "I'll stop mentioning your truly huge age, if you stop being sarcastic about Art.....Do we have a deal ?"

"Alright.....Make a fool of yourself. See if I care."

Iris was sort of right, Art Singer wasn't exactly the father of the child that new mothers dreamed of. On the other hand, Deb really didn't want him as a permanent part of her life, or Ramsay's. She still slept with him once or twice a week, but she did now take precautions. Art was a warm masculine body in her bed and they both quite liked his penis. Nothing more, though Iris could never grasp that. Iris was checking the cot for weight, by lifting one corner.

"Not as bad as I thought."

"I'll go at the front.....We'll manage it." Said Deb.

They did, without any real problems. After using most of a bottle of Campus made hand cleaner, they settled down in the APC for lunch.

"I heard a container ship came aground near Ravenscar." Said Deb.

"The scavengers will be all over it like flies."

"No, they're all too busy."

"Should we ?" Asked Iris.

"Why not ? After our lunch of course. I did book one of the Biology students to baby sit all day."

They fist bumped while eating an apple crumble Deb had made them for dessert.

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Ishmael McGrath had become an expert at using the crutch. He could move along the campus corridors faster than many of the fit and healthy research staff. He sometimes bumped off a wall though, causing his hip to give him a few moments of intense pain.

"Ish... Just the person I was hoping to bump into." Said Andy Korenberg. "I just heard back from Norway and the new filter elements are screening out ninety five percent of the Green Death pathogen."

"Brilliant news, though we couldn't have done it without Horace.....Walk with me Andy, or we can find somewhere to sit. We can never stand though, standing is the one thing that sets off the pain in my hip."

Actually quite a few things set his hip off, he was just fed up with having to list them all. Ish began to walk towards the animal pens, leaving Andy to walk with him if he chose to. Pain had done that to him, it had removed most of his good manners and politeness.

"Yes, of course.....Sorry Ish." Said Andy. "Any good news with your hip ? I know Áslaug had you in for more tests."

"Nothing like tests by a pathologist to make my week." Hissed Ish.

Ish knew he was being rude, though he often couldn't stop the flow of words.

"Sorry Andy, it's not your fault. Áslaug has done the best she can, but they can't amputate my hip. Well..... It was once suggested, but I declined the offer. If I can blame anyone, it was the gang member who stabbed me with his favourite knife. They found a staggering cocktail of bacteria and other nasties on that blade."

The tip of the blade had been removed from his side, though it had dug into his hipbone. Bacteria mutate all the time, often becoming resistant to anti-bacterials. They were having some success at reducing the growth of whatever was eating into his bones, but every month the pain and inflammation got slightly worse. The current prognosis had him alive to get onto the shuttle to leave

the planet, but only just. JV had promised him a place no matter what. Ish was still undecided about going and taking his infected hip to a new world.

“We have the best medical brains left on the planet Ish.” Said Andy. “If anyone can fix you, they can.”

“So I keep being told Andy, so I keep being told.”

To his surprise Andy stayed with him right into the animals pens, most were driven off by his attitude after a few corridors. Even when the pain wasn't that bad, there was still the constant thought that he was unlikely to be on the fleet of shuttles to a new world. The only person who didn't react to his dark cloud of an attitude was Biff, though he sometimes wondered why she put up with him. Horace and his work were the only things that enabled him to shrug off the dark thoughts, though only for a while.

“Kata still unlocks and feeds Horace.” He told Andy. “Worth her weight in gold is that girl. And her brother of course, Antun has learned so much.”

“Who looks after her child ?”

“She does, you'll see. We set up a kind of baby care section for Mia.”

Kata had been expecting a boy at the beginning, but it appeared even the latest neutron scanners could get it wrong. Somewhere between scan three and four the baby had shifted about and there was no penis after all. After almost exactly nine months of pregnancy, Kata had given birth to Mia, a perfect baby girl.

“Ish....Horace was fed up with plain cabbage balls.” Said Kata. “I mixed in some shredded beetroot to give it more bite.”

“Cabbage was boring.” Said Horace.

They'd become better at it, the AI had become better at it too and they could now include their captive alien in normal conversations. The biggest advance over the last year or so had been hard work by Horace, combined with volunteers reading to her. Her vocabulary was now several times larger than the average human.

“Did you do all the tolerance tests ?” Asked Ish.

“I've nibbled at beetroot before..... I'm fine.” Said Horace.

“Think of all the paperwork if Kata poisons you to death.”

There was laughter, Horace had learned to laugh, or at least to fake it. Was there a difference ? Ish thought half the people laughing at old comedy films weren't genuinely that amused. Ish took Andy into an area of the control room that had become a baby crèche for Mia. There was a papoose type thing that Kata used to carry her baby about, a crib made out of a plastic animal feed bin and of course, the small chemical plant to keep Mia's things clean and sterile.

“I hope you're impressed Andy, I designed and built the crib.” Said Ish.

“Yes, all very nice Ish. I'm also impressed with the way you can talk to Horace. You're having real conversations with an alien Ish, a fucking alien.”

“I suppose we are....It's something we take for granted. Go and talk to her yourself if you like, Horace can be very amusing and rarely meets anyone new.”

“I can, really ? Just like that ?”

“Yes Andy, just like that. You do pay for her food and lodging after all, or at least Fifth West does.

Ask her about dark matter and prepare to have your entire world turned upside down. Or the top ten things she likes to eat.... She enjoys talking about food.”

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Every Fifth West Campus had a base commander and a science officer; it was something JV insisted on. There was the occasional smart arse remark about JV being a Star Trek fan, but most accepted that it was a good idea. Francine Lazan had been appointed base commander before the alien invasion, so had just about all the senior staff. She'd expected her duties to change because of the invasion, though she hadn't expected to be using a mechanical lifting robot, better known to everyone as GruntBots.

"Come on Francine, set the laser guidance." Said Art. "The GruntBot will do the rest."

"She obviously wants to do it old school, leave her alone." Said Rick Piotroski.

Her two key people, though she'd never let her HR Manager Louise Olvera know she felt that way. All her managers were equal, as she'd often told them at meetings. In reality Art was her science officer and Rick looked after all the computer systems. They were her two key guys and both of them were obviously loving her finding it hard to align the shuttle's small fusion device. Andy was project leader for the shuttles of course, though he worked directly for JV. He should have been there and had promised to arrive a little later. Lately he seemed to spend a lot of time talking to the alien, too much time she thought.

Lack of practise was Francine's problem and having two left hands, or at least it felt that way.

"Come on Francine.....You can do it." Said MacLaren.

She'd attended the completion party for the thirty eighth Diaspora Valkyrie shuttle, without anyone telling her she'd have to work for her glass of campus wine and slice of cake.

"It's just ceremonial, like the last rivet in the hull of an ocean liner." Art had told her.

For something ceremonial it felt like a lot of hard work and anxiety. The thirty eighth shuttle didn't sound that momentous, but it meant two thirds of their fleet was ready for take-off, at least in theory. In reality there was still quite a lot of checking and calibration before they all headed for the stars.

"To think.....I got a prize at college for hand-eye coordination using the old MKII GruntBot." Said Francine.

It moved, she could have sworn the damned machine had just moved slightly to the left, just to annoy her. Francine held her breath and used the micro-movement dial on the GruntBot, to move it a tenth of a millimetre at a time. One green light came on, a tiny green light on the side of the fusion device. She was installing a tiny fusion reactor with enough potential power to flatten a city, maybe two cities.

"Practice the movements in your head, do it all several times and then practise the leap into the air when you've finished doing it." Said MacLaren.

Nice of her to try and help, but none of it was helping her at that moment. Francine switched around the controls of the GruntBot, inverting the stick control. Just the slightest touch on the micro-movement and.....

"She's got two green lights." Yelled Art.

For something ceremonial and symbolic, her science officer seemed to be taking it all far too seriously.

"I need quiet for the next part.....Please." She said.

Quiet would have been nice for the whole thing, though Francine had accepted there would be a party atmosphere. It was good; they all needed the small victories that kept them going. Damaging the fusion vessel wouldn't vaporise Yorkshire, or at least it probably wouldn't. It would just be a failure when they badly needed that small victory. Francine left the stick inverted and realised it was the right moment. She turned on the laser guidance beams. To her the alignment looked perfect, but

the GruntBot knew the fusion vessel needed to move four microns to the left, its left, not her left. It could do it on its own, but where was the kudos in that. Francine used the dial and moved the device such a tiny amount, that her eyes saw no movement at all. The Gods seem to favour her at that precise moment, she had four green lights.

“Here we go.” She said.

No connect button or an instruction to the GruntBot. Francine used a keyboard to tell the shuttle’s AI that the fusion vessel was ready and aligned. The AI did the rest, using tiny connectors to pull the fusion device into the connector. Francine hardly dared to breathe until the AI told her it had control of the fusion vessel and wanted permission to test run the device.

“Are we letting the shuttle run up the fusion motors ?” She asked.

“Yeah, why not.....Go for it.” Said Art.

Francine had tried hard not to judge Art for having an affair with Deb Newman. They were consenting adults with needs, crap, her own needs had tempted her in some strange directions. It was just that he rarely seemed bothered to even visit the child he’d fathered. Then there was Deb’s rather quirky way of looking at the world, sometimes it became downright eccentric. An attitude that seemed to be rubbing off on Art. Francine told the shuttle’s AI to go for it. Actually she entered an eight digit code and hit enter.

“Yay, we have engines.” Yelled Andy.

He was late to the party, but better late than never. The onboard AI was telling her there was little extra background radiation. That was pretty damned good for a brand new set of engines. Francine waited for the engines to shut off, before addressing a very excitable crowd.

“We have our thirty eighth shuttle. Two thirds of our fleet is now ready.” She shouted.

They cheered her and were still cheering as she went to the refreshment table for a glass of campus wine and a slice of cake that would be impossible to identify by its taste.

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None of them were experts at maintaining diesel boat engines. Doug knew more than the rest of them, though even he admitted to not being an expert. The Eleanor had brought them a long way, over half the way across the globe. No proper maintenance and no essential spares, yet the engines had purred across the oceans, until now. Doug had summed it up after the first worrying metallic grinding noise had lasted for an hour.

“We’re about a day away from Tripoli in Libya. Not my first choice of somewhere to look for another boat. Better than drifting with no engines though. We’ve neglected the poor old girl and although she was probably someone’s much loved home from home, the Eleanor was likely to have been quite old when you found her. We’ve worn her out, simple as that.”

There had been a few problems in Sri Lanka, though not with their boat. Ela had become infatuated with a boy, which was bound to happen somewhere. His family had reacted badly and.....They’d had to run away as fast as the Eleanor would carry them. Several months lost as a result and it had been a miracle they’d found the Suez Canal. More delays near the toe of Italy when an alien ocean going craft of some sort had begun following them. It had taken them over a year to travel a distance a passenger aircraft could have easily managed in less than a day. They’d also done so many diversions that the Eleanor’s navigation system was saying they’d travelled over a hundred thousand miles. No wonder their much loved boat was beginning to complain a little. Not that Doug received the support he was probably expecting.

“What do you mean look for another boat ?” Matt had asked.

Until he'd said it Bren really hadn't reacted to the news emotionally. It suddenly hit her that Doug was suggesting they abandoned a vessel she now considered to be her home.

"I agree, we can't just abandon her. The Eleanor has looked after us and brought us over halfway around the world." Bren had said. "Surely we can fix her?"

Ela had actually cried about them dumping their boat to go looking for another. Doug had shrugged a lot and claimed there was nowhere likely to have the right parts to repair such an old set of engines. Several rows later they were all crowded into the area below decks that was barely large enough to be called an engine room. Doug was working on the engines, trying to get enough facts to give them a decent prognosis for their boat. Like the relatives of a much loved old aunt, they leant against the walls, while Doug tinkered. It took him a while to come to a conclusion.

"Well, things aren't as bad as I feared." Said Doug. "Think of the noises as the warning signs of far worse to come. She needs a partial rebuild, which I can do. We will need a few days in a proper boatyard though, somewhere with the right tools."

"I take it somewhere the size of Tripoli will have a few boatyards?" Asked Matt.

"Oh yes, and we're more likely to find parts for older engines on the south side of the Mediterranean, than the more affluent north." Said Doug.

"So... We're not abandoning Eleanor?" Asked Ela.

"No...I can fix her."

Ela actually kissed Doug on the cheek. He couldn't let the poor girl down now, she was still sobbing. Bren felt a sense of relief too.....It just wouldn't have been right to simply get a new boat. She did feel a need to ground them all though.

"How about the aliens.....Is Tripoli somewhere they might have decided to occupy?" She asked.

"Only one way to find out." Said Matt.

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For Pandora Gray it quickly became her main interest, before becoming what got her into the lab early every morning. From there the infection Ish had in his hip had become a full blown obsession. Infections that didn't respond to modern anti-bacterials were rare, but not unknown. The blade he'd been stabbed with had stabbed several other people; there had been at least half a dozen traces of different DNA on the knife. The very busy stabber had never so much as wiped his favourite weapon, allowing all sorts of bacteria to grow and thrive. The latest high definition scan of Ish's infected hip was up on the big screen in the lab.

"I'll admit I was sceptical when you began a kind of gene warfare on the bacteria." Said Áslaug Kárason. "It's slowed the infection down though. You've bought Ish some time, but as we both realise. The infection will eventually win."

Just a blob on the screen, like a particularly nasty abscess. It was eating into Ish's bones, muscles and connective tissues. Digging into it was likely to spread the particularly aggressive bugs, as was surgery to try and remove it. Dora had done well to slow the infection down, but Ish would still be dead in two years, three at the most.

"I know the risks Dora, but we really should consider surgery." Said Áslaug.

"Best scenario is we leave Ish in a wheelchair, worst.....The fucking thing spreads throughout his body." Said Dora.

"A wheelchair is a lot better than dying Dora, a hell of a lot better."

Áslaug meant well, but the conversation was digging at fresh wounds, going over the same ground she'd been over with Ish, so many times before. In the end she'd stopped trying to push him into treatment he didn't want.

"Ish has said no to surgery." She said. "Bullying him doesn't work, trust me I've tried. Lately he's been talking about staying behind when the shuttles leave."

"Crap Dora.....Do you think he means it?"

"Oh yes, he means it."

"If he does, will you stay behind with him?"

Dora could feel her hands trembling. Ish had asked her the same thing and it had hurt her deeply. The fact that he'd needed to ask. And now Áslaug asking the same thing.

"Of course I will Áslaug, of course I will. He has an idea about making sure people still get their little yellow pills after everyone leaves. Not a bad reason to stay, we might keep the organised groups from dying of the Green Death."

A hand gripped her shoulder, the first time Áslaug had shown any sign of affection.

"We had a data burst from the Kingdom people last night." Said Áslaug. "I can put it up on the big screen, if you want to see it right now?"

"Let's do this in style..... Put it on my computer and we'll look at it in comfy chairs, while we have coffee and slightly stale cookies." Said Dora.

"No coffee I'm afraid, none at all. We had visitors in the early hours of the morning. They even found your secret stash."

"Post grad students turned coffee looters, the world really is coming to an end." Said Dora. "What do we have left in the kitchen in the way of hot drinks?"

"Nothing apart from the campus herbal tea, which always tastes of camomile."

"Alright, two camomile teas coming up."

Dora looked in all her various hiding places in their tiny kitchen and it was true, all their coffee had been found by night time raiders. Coffee looting and tea bag rustling had been going on for a while, there were rumours Art had his own pack of raiders. It had become almost socially acceptable, but it had left Dora to return to Áslaug with two sad looking cups of herbal tea and a plate of even sadder looking cookies.

"It's Art's guys, I know it is." Said Dora. "I'll have his guts for garters.... So, what are the Kingdom telling us?"

Áslaug liked to read about two paragraphs of any report to refresh her memory, even if she knew the material perfectly. It was a harmless foible Dora had decided to live with. It gave her a chance to look at the drawing stuck to the wall next to her desk. They'd been testing the children of the farm workers, once it was realised the little yellow pills caused more gastro-intestinal problems in kids than adults. It was a drawing of Dora, the sort toddlers tended to draw. A triangle for a skirt, with spindly legs coming out of it. A bright red top and blonde hair so bright that it seemed to glow. Underneath the drawing a young child had written a thank you to Doctor Dora, who had stopped his tummy from hurting. She hadn't, not really. They'd just cut down on the dose given to the under twelves.

"Well, the key thing is that despite quite a few moans about stomach pains and vomiting, more people are asking for the pills." Said Áslaug.

"And the numbers dying from strange flu like symptoms?" Asked Dora.

"Very few and the numbers are still dropping, which explains why more of the Kingdom's citizens are willing to put up with bad guts a few times a year. Very, very bad guts Dora. I'm a rare thing, an adult with severe intestinal problems after taking the damn pills. To be honest, I dread taking them."

"It is only twice a year and...It's a lot better than dying.....I just wish we could get samples to confirm the deaths in the West Country were a result of the Green Death."

“You could probably talk MacLaren into flying down there a few times a year, though I can see Francine objecting. It’s a hell of a risk for a few tissue and blood samples.”

It was a huge risk, too much of a risk. Dora hated cuddling up to one of the bogeymen of medical research, but it was sensible to do so.

“We’re going to cosy up to assumptions Áslaug.” Said Dora. “I hate to do it, but we have to assume the deaths with no clear cause are all from the Green Death. It’ll help in the long run by pushing more of those who are....The pill hesitants, into risking a bit of gut ache to stay alive.”

“Assumptions and fiddling data.....My old college would be so proud.” Said Áslaug.

“Bending data a little Áslaug, just a bit of justified bending. We are the post-truth generation after all.”

They both chuckled and once Dora would have been a little ashamed of herself. Times had changed though and occasionally the ends did justify the means. If people survived by being nudged towards the little yellow pills, that was wonderful. It didn’t stop being wonderful if they used skewed data to do it.

“I just wish we had some solid numbers on the others.” Said Dora. “The loners and families hiding out and who probably haven’t even heard of the Green Death.”

“We did try computer modelling, there are just so many unknowns. Pick a number between half a million and five million, either could be right. All doomed to die from something they don’t even realise is in the air. Some have probably died already, their deaths put down to the flu.”

One of her lecturers at college had taught Dora a strange way to look at what appeared to be insoluble problems. It was the scientific equivalent of throwing filthy socks at the wall and seeing which ones stuck. Weirdly it had sometimes worked where meticulous work and sound deductive reasoning had failed.

“I know you’re busy Áslaug.”

“Oh, how I’ve come to dread those words. What do you want me to do ?”

“At medical school we used to think of a crazy idea, which we all pulled apart. Nothing was too crazy, no idea too off the wall or downright nuts. We’d discuss every idea, keeping anything even vaguely less crazy. In the end we often came up with something good by discussing the crazy stuff.

Sometimes when nothing sensible was left, we got one of the slightly nuts ideas to work. Fancy giving it a go with our loners and those in hiding problem ?”

“I’m game....I’m assuming you have an insane idea to kick off with ?”

“I do indeed.... We start off by seeding rain clouds in a grid pattern, to make sure we get everyone in a given area. We feed the medicine into the falling rain in a form easily absorbed by the skin. That will give us a way of curing the loners of the Green Death.”

Áslaug was giving her a look, of course she was, it was an insane idea. That was the whole point though.

“That is so crazy.....Alright Dora I get it, the more weird the better. When do you want to meet up to discuss the idea ?”

“How about dinner tonight at our place ? Ish is cooking, which he enjoys doing. He’s always a lot less doom and gloom over dinner. Will you come ?”

“Yes, I’ll be there.”

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