

Ishmael

Chapter 14 - Bridlington

“Blue oceans, areas of green that had to be forests or tropical jungles. The view was Earth as the first space travel pioneers had seen it and felt the same exhilaration she was feeling.”



They'd spent four nights at Bridlington Station. Deb Newman had forced open a door to an office and she'd pushed a desk up against the door before they settled down to sleep. It seemed that no one had thought a small seaside station was worth looting, the kiosk was still full of chocolate bars and cans of drinks. Iris particularly liked the small cherry flapjacks and luckily there was a whole box of them. Deb ignored Iris moaning about not having a flushing toilet, or a working phone to call her family. It was expecting to be pushed everywhere in a wheelchair that caused the argument on their fifth morning at the station. They'd decided to move to the North Beach area of Bridlington. Iris sat herself in the wheelchair, a bag full of cherry flapjacks on her lap.

“Before you get too comfortable.” Deb Said. “You did walk into A&E Iris and you told me you'd arrived on the bus. I know you've been through a lot, but your leg is healed now.”

“It still hurts.”

“That's because you're not exercising it. I'm sorry Iris, the wheelchair is staying here and we're walking to North Beach. We can walk through buildings and hide better. We stick out like a sore thumb with me pushing you along the pavement in that thing.”

An alien device of some kind had landed near the golf club to the south. Since then they'd seen a few drones circling the station. Deb was hoping that moving just a mile or so further north might make them a little safer.

“You promised not to abandon me.”

Iris was crying, but Deb was used to that. Mrs Bouvard had a whole armoury of tricks to get her own way, crying was one of the milder ones.

“I'm not abandoning you Iris, I've just pushed you far enough. You've got a bag of food and some water; stay here if you want to. It was your idea to go to the care home where a friend of yours lives.”

“I hate to be a burden, but my leg still hurts.”

“No more Iris, I've fallen for that too often. Follow me or stay here, the choice is yours. I'm going to keep off the streets where I can and head for the church we can see.”

“Christ Church it's called. I used to go there when I was here on holiday.”

“See Iris you know the area, what would I do without you.” Said Deb.

“I'm just a useless old woman.”

“You were playing Shinty with a neighbour's children. Stop playing the old soldier.”

Deb picked up the bags which contained her essentials and a little food. She ignored the crying and headed for the station entrance. By the time she was outside Iris was behind her.

“Once we're out of the station approach we keep to Quay Street.” Said Iris.

“You'd better lead Iris.”

It was a good way to make sure the pace was right for the eighty six year old. Most of the shops they passed showed obvious signs of being vandalised. The worst to pass were the small convenience stores. The food in the chillers and freezers was now beyond going rotten. Whole life cycles of

bacteria and fungus had formed, some spilling out of freezers in a large foul smelling mess. If Deb had learned one thing recently, it was that rotting frozen chickens smelled worse than a month old human corpse.

“Stop Iris..... I can..... Yes, there’s a drone. Get into the shop.”

The drones crackled a little, the sort of sound trams made going over junctions. Hearing the sound and recognising what it meant had probably saved their lives on several occasions. The shop was for leather good, purses bags and walking sticks for some reason. The broken door was no obstacle; they were inside when the saucer shaped drone went over the street.

“Do you think they’re looking for us ?” Asked Iris.

“I doubt it, just a routine patrol of some kind.”

The drones had laser weapons; they’d seen a woman almost cut in half by one of them. That had been when they’d just arrived in Bridlington. They’d been less wise then, it was a miracle they hadn’t been killed.

“Come on, the church isn’t far. Keep behind me Iris.”

The church was quite close, right on a roundabout. ‘Jesus is Lord’ was on a sign next to the doors. Deb ran the last few yards, hoping Iris wasn’t far behind her. It appeared that playing Shinty had been good for her, Iris arrived at the church doors with her. Deb pushed and the doors opened a little, enough for them to go inside.

“It’s a bit dark in here.” Said Iris.

“We’ll be fine.... No food in here, no reason for anyone to loot the place.”

Deb didn’t see the man running at them until he was quite close. There was a wild look in his eyes, more in that look than just being hungry. He grabbed her bag, while he screamed at her.

“Gimme the fucking bag bitch.” He yelled.

She was a soldier’s wife, she wasn’t going to give up her spare clothing and food without a fight. She raised her fist as though about to strike him in the face. The grubby faced man flinched back. Deb kicked him hard in the ankles and then kicked him again. As he cowered back she kicked him hard between the legs. Iris was screaming, a constant terrified scream.

“Be quiet..... There might be more of them..... Christ Iris, shut the fuck up.”

Iris was quiet and Deb dug the spanner out of her bag, the one she’d taken from the truck’s toolbox. It was a little rusty, but it felt so good to have it in her hand. So tempting to hit the writhing man on the ground. She wanted to hit him in the face and carrying on hitting until he was no longer a threat to them.

“Don’t hit me..... I’m hungry, been stuck in here for days. I’m just hungry.”

There was still that look in his eyes, the look of someone with more problems than just hunger.

“You should have asked.” She said. “We can spare some food, if you like flapjacks.”

“I’ll eat anything right now.”

“Are you alone ?”

“Yeah, just me.”

Deb found out he was lying when the second man ran at her. He collided with her, knocking her over and sending the spanner flying out of her hand. It was gloomy inside the church; her eyes still hadn’t adjusted to it. All she saw was a dark jacket, all she felt was a hand trying to pull down her jeans.

“No !” She yelled.

He was strong, far stronger and bigger than his friend. As his face came round to look at her, there was the same wild look she’d seen in the other man’s eyes. Drugs maybe, he didn’t stink of booze, just the usual body odour she probably had too.

"I've got drug resistant aids !" She yelled.

His hand stopped pulling at her pants and he leant back, as if to get a better look at her. Deb used her knee, ramming it up hard between his legs. Drugs, he had to be on something powerful. She'd felt her knee hit something soft, but he hadn't even gasped.

"Bitch." He said.

It wasn't just his strength, he let all his weight hold her down and he was a big guy. Deb had been taught by the best, her husband. Never give in, if you can't kick them, hit them, if you can't hit them, bite them.

"Bastard." She yelled.

Deb ignored the crazy eyes and filthy beard. She leant forward and bit deep into his cheek. It was so wonderful to hear him scream as she tasted his blood in her mouth. Her knee in the groin might have missed anything soft and sensitive, but he was now screaming.

"Fucking crazy bitch."

He leant back and hit her twice with his fist. The first blow to the side of her head, the second right in the middle of her face. The pain was incredible, he'd probably broken her nose. Deb still tried to struggle and bite him again.... He was just so heavy.

"Leave her alone !"

He was quite still now, though his weight still pinned her to the floor. Iris was pulling at the man, trying to pull him off her. Deb pushed against his shoulder and together they had him off her and onto his back. There was blood on him, mostly on his head and neck. Iris was holding the large heavy spanner.

"I hit him twice, do you think he's dead ?" Asked Iris.

Deb felt for a pulse and just about felt it. Slow and a little erratic, but the bastard was still alive.

"He's alive, just." She said. "I can't see him living long with the amount of blood he's losing. Where did his friend go to ?"

"Not very brave that one. He ran out of the door when I picked up the spanner."

"He might have more friends, we should leave."

Iris was wiping her face with something clean and soft. It took Deb a moment to realise it was a pair of her precious clean knickers.

"Thank you, but we really need to get out of here." Said Deb.

Iris handed her the blood stained underwear and Deb finished wiping her face and neck with them.

"How do I look ?"

"Hmmm..... You probably shouldn't look in a mirror for a while."

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Billy wasn't that large, some might have called him small and slightly squalid. Pam Rath didn't enjoy having the job of sitting in the pilot's chair, even if most of the trip was going to be under automatic control by the onboard AI. What Pam did like was the wonderful view through the triple glazed toughened ceramic front window. No view screen, no camera feed to pretend was a window. The designers had decided that out of all the people onboard, the pilot needed a real window. Richard leaning over her to share the view was spoiling the experience a little.

"Wow, that is beautiful." He said. "I imagined seeing hundreds of alien craft orbiting Earth. Everything looks so normal."

They were about three quarters of the way home and had a perfect view of planet Earth. Just after sunrise for the Asia/Pacific region according to Billy. Pam just knew it looked beautiful and no matter what might be going on down there, she was looking forward to getting home. Blue oceans, areas of

green that had to be forests or tropical jungles. The view was Earth as the first space travel pioneers had seen it and felt the same exhilaration she was feeling. Just one thing was missing, the electromagnetic noise generated by everything from TVs, radios and everything else that meant intelligent beings lived down there. A few hot spots of activity, but the background chatter had almost vanished.

"Billy isn't happy, he's been trying to contact traffic control for an hour, then he tried an encrypted shout for help to mission control in Cardiff." She said.

"Could that be a problem ? What will he do about that ?"

"Hmm.....I love Billy, we all do. But he is a bit like the kid down the road who gets the special bus to school. Not stupid, just not the sharpest knife in the drawer. Once he realises no one is answering his routine request for a handshake, he'll refer the matter to me. I'll tell him not to worry about it."

"Simple as that ?"

"Yes, simple as that."

Eventually, as they circled the Earth, the view shifted through daylight in the Pacific to evening on the West coast of the Americas, to night time across most of Europe. The planet she was born on, grew up on and called home was no longer familiar. Apart from a few places in Scandinavia, the world below them was in complete darkness.

"Simple as that..... Turn the lights out and our civilisation collapses." Said Richard.

"There'll be people fighting back Richard. We just have to find them."

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They'd only intended to stay on the Isle of Sheppey for two or three days. Tyler Bates wasn't surprised when his truck wouldn't start; their flashlights had stopped working the day before. There was food, but they couldn't live on crisps and fizzy water forever. Liza had insisted on having a family meeting to decide on what to do next.

"Tirsa is an adult now and both Zane and Tonya have grown up fast, too damn fast. They deserve a say in where we go and why we're going there. We need a better plan than walking across Kent, grabbing what we can find." She'd told him.

Being honest with himself that had been his one and only plan. Survival was what mattered in a world that had no safe places, no sanctuaries. He'd once skimmed a book by a survival nut. That talked about finding a hilltop and fortifying it. Alright as long as the hilltop had a water supply and a supermarket that delivered. He was now sat in the ruined long bar in Bruce's Inn, not knowing what to suggest to his kids.

"Couldn't we find another truck dad ?" Asked Tonya.

"Our truck hasn't broken down." He replied. "The aliens are messing with anything electrical, that's why our flashlights stopped working. We were lucky to make it this far. From here we'll be on foot."

"How about all our stuff..... My clothes ?" Asked Tirsa.

They'd found a store that had sold backpacks. One of the few stores that hadn't been looted and vandalised. The backpacks were the colourful kind that young kids used for school, complete with cartoon characters. His kids had already voiced their disgust at being expected to use them.

"You've got to get used to carrying everything you need." Said Liza. "Just the essentials, things you really can't do without."

"I remember a film on TV where a man and a boy take a shopping trolley everywhere with them.

Couldn't we do that ?" Asked Zane.

"That'd be fun." Added Tonya.

Tyler was beginning to Hate Hollywood. His kids were regularly coming up with survival ideas they'd seen in films or TV shows. Most weren't practical and quite a few were downright dangerous.

"I remember that film, they kept to the roads." He said. "They definitely weren't hiding from aliens. I'd love a horse and cart, but a shopping cart on four squeaky wheels.....No, wherever we go, we'll be carrying what we need."

"But my clothes.....The packs are small, I can carry two." Said Tirsia.

"We'll be travelling for a long time." Said Liza. "Carry two if you want, but they're yours to carry. No turning your father into a packhorse, he'll have his own things."

"So, where are we going?" Asked Zane.

It had arrived, the moment he'd been dreading. What weird and wonderful idea would they come up with and how upset would they be when he accepted none of them? Liza must have noticed him hesitating.

"We wanted to hear your ideas." She said. "What sort of place do you think we should be look for?"

"Easy..... Find a farm in the middle of nowhere and grow our own food." Said Zane.

It was predictable, Tyler had thought about doing the same, until he'd spent a few hours one night thinking about it.

"We're not experienced farmers." He said. "We're city people, always have been. If I wanted to be a chicken farmer, I wouldn't even know which way up to plant them."

Quite a lot of laughter, one of his better on the fly jokes.

"Other people will have thought of that, other families. We're likely to find those nice quiet places in the middle of nowhere are already taken."

"We can fight them." Yelled Tonya.

There was a five minute gap in the discussion while his wife said a few words on the evils of wars and violence in general. At one time Tyler would have agreed with every word. Now though? He just looked at the family he loved and wanted them to survive.

"Somewhere isolated sounds great, but I don't think we'd survive the first winter." He said. "Then there are the things we need that we can't make. Clothing is one, I can't see us ever making our own. Then there are soaps and cleaning products. The most important thing in many ways will be feminine hygiene products."

"Oh dad, please..... Do we have to?" From Tirsia.

"What do you mean?" Asked Zane.

"Tampons, your father is talking about Tampons. We need them, unless we want to live like savages."

"Like the Vikings..... Teacher told us about them." Said Tonya.

"Yes, they probably enjoyed being dirty and smelly, but we don't." Said Tyler. "We need somewhere safe to live, but close to somewhere with the things we can't grow or make. Any ideas?"

"A castle with moat." Shouted Tonya, who seemed to be enjoying herself.

"The top floor of a tower block." Suggested Tirsia.

It was Zane who came up with roughly the same idea it had taken him and Liza several nights of quiet words in the early hours of the morning to come up with it.

"We need both sorts of places." Said Zane. "A quiet place we can defend that's close to a big town, or a small town with a big supermarket. We'd need to bring the stuff we need back to our fortified home."

"Yes, the looters aren't taking everything yet, but eventually they will." Said Tyler.

“So are we all agreed then.... Find a big house not far away from somewhere we can get supplies ?”
Asked Liza.

“How far will we have to walk ?” Asked Tonya.

“We can walk along the coast towards Margate.” Said Tyler. “A walk that’ll take a few days, about fifty miles or so.”

“Fifty miles !” Said Tirsia. “My feet will fall off.”

“We’ll do it slowly and we’ll probably find somewhere before we reach Margate.” Said Liza.

“Couldn’t we stay here ?” Asked Tonya. “We have food.”

“We can’t live on crisps honey, we’ll die of something dreadful.” Said Liza.

It wasn’t a brilliant idea, he was selling them on days of walking while scavenging enough to eat.

There was no better plan though. His kids didn’t look enthusiastic, though they did all agree.

“Time to fill your backpacks and dump what you don’t need.” He said. “We’ll begin walking back to the mainland in an hour.”

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They’d managed to reach the foot of the tower without being seriously attacked. Two drones had flown out of somewhere high up, but neither had been difficult to destroy. The problem was finding a way inside, when there was no sign of an entrance.

“Everything looks like solid metal, it even sounds solid.” Said Chris Crawford.

As if to prove the point, Chris rammed the stock of his assault rifle against the wall. It gave off a dull thunk that brought to mind walls made of metal that were several inches thick. Chris was talking to him again, even if he still wasn’t being all that friendly. Matthew Newman remembered something Owen had said, he just needed something confirmed.

“Where is Owen ?” He asked Brenda Grundy. “He’s been like a ghost haunting me since we arrived and now that I need him....”

“I saw him with the soldiers from Melbourne.” Said Chris.

“I’ll call them and get him over here.” Said Brenda.

Waiting for Owen to turn up gave him a chance to look at the tower. His eyes inevitably looked up, everyone’s did. The greyish metal tower had to be over five hundred feet tall. To think the alien machines had built it in about four days. Matt almost admired them, no gang of human builders could have built it in four months, maybe even four years. The strange thing was why the aliens weren’t attacking them.

“If they wanted to, they could drop rocks on us.” Said Chris.

“Don’t give them ideas.” Said Bren. “Maybe they’re relying on the strength of the walls to keep us out.”

Owen arrived on the run, one of the men from Melbourne arriving with him. A large man called Duncan who reminded him of Charlie, the huge native Australian soldier who’d died when they’d attacked the alien near Clyde Point. Duncan was a gentle giant of a man, who seemed to think his main job was to protect Owen.

“Perfect, I needed you both to help me hunt for something.” Said Matt.

“What are we hunting ?” Asked Owen.

“A doorway Owen. Then Duncan can blow it open.”

Matt sometimes enjoyed leaving people looking confused, his wife often said it was one of his most annoying traits. It didn’t matter if he turned left or right, he intended to walk right round the tower. Matt turned to his right and began to walk, his small army of Fifth West fighters following him.

“You gave me the idea Owen.” He said. “Tell me again about when the aliens arrived.”

“The first we knew was when something landed, something big.” Said Owen. “It hit the ground so hard that people began running away straight away. Then the thing opened up and all these robots came out, like metal men on wheels. They began to build the tower. It only took them three or four days to take apart the thing that had landed and turn it into..... This, the tower.”

“Where did the robots go once it was built ?” Asked Matt.

“I don’t know..... Back inside I guess.”

“Lots of machines coming out and going back in again.” Said Matt.

“I get it.....Even if they tried to smooth out the ground, there’ll still be some trace of the track in and out of the door they used.” Said Bren.

“Even if it’s just a hint of packed down topsoil, we’ll find it.” Said Matt.

It was a long way around the base of the tower and they found an uncovered trench full of human bones. The Fifth West soldiers spoke of seeing the same thing in many places. To Matt and Brenda it was a new horror. Owen simply sat on the ground and sobbed for a while, holding his head in his hands.

“Why ? No one in Maningrida gave them any trouble.” He said.

“It’s what they do..... After they’ve finished doing what they do to us.” Said Duncan.

“Christ Matt, there are kids bones in there.” Said Brenda.

Not just bones, whatever the robots were doing to humans, they seemed to be doing it in a rush. Most of the bones had a residue of flesh and sinews attached to them, some had large chunks of muscle. Under the hot sun of Northern Australia, the trench had become a hell of stench and decay.

“We should fill it in at least.” Said Chris.

Matt wanted to carry on and get some payback. Was it payback against machines though ? The aliens would just build more, identical to the ones they’d destroy. He was proud of his ability to get the mission completed. It was his own moral compass that gave him a hard time occasionally and Bren was nodding at him.

“Nothing fancy, we have a mission to complete.” He said. “We’re going to fill in the trench with dirt and say a few quick words. That alright with you Owen ?”

“We need to leave a marker.”

“I can put something together.” Said Duncan.

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Deb Newman hadn’t been that keen on going to the care home. It was to the north of town though, quite a distance from where the aliens had landed their device. Iris had talked up the place, describing it as a little bit of Eden for the elderly. Her friend there kept changing her name though, sometimes Doris, the next moment Ivy or even Constance. At first Deb had put it all down to the effects of being eighty six on her memory. As they observed the quite ordinary looking terraced house from a ruined building across the street, she wanted a little more clarity.

“You described somewhere the size of Blenheim Palace Iris. How well do you know this place ?”

Actually The Brambles Care Facility looked like three terraced houses knocked into one. A small fire had burned out a downstairs room at one end, but a lot of the houses in the street had fire damage. The sign above the main door was still intact, the flowers in the garden were perfect. All in all it looked a safe place to visit.

“It’s really nice inside.” Said Iris.

“The church looked nice from the outside. I’m too bruised to take another beating today. How well do you know this Ivy, or was it Doris ?”

Iris Bouvard was looking a little awkward, Deb had become good at knowing when the old lady was bending the truth.

"I just wanted you to agree to come here..... The garden at the back is so pretty."

"Do you really know someone who lives here?"

"No."

Damn, sometimes it was harder than pulling teeth.

"So how do you know the place Iris?"

"My granddaughter brought me to an open day. No use though, the fees were ridiculous and she wasn't earning enough to.....Anyway, I like being independent."

"Good for you.....Come on; we might as well give the place a look over. Round the back though, we'll peer into a few windows before banging on the door."

Deb watched and listened for a good minute, before hurrying Iris across the road. In a way the lie improved things. No worrying about huge outpourings of grief if they found a building full of dead bodies. An unlocked gate to a side alley took them to the rear and into gardens that were a little disappointing. Still quite pretty, but the way Iris had described them.... She'd set the bar pretty high.

"The big bay window..... There." Said Iris pointing. "We had a presentation there, about all the health and safety features."

"What is the room next to it?"

"Erm.... Yes I remember, it's the night warden's office."

"Keep behind me Iris. Run away if I get into trouble, alright?"

"Don't be preposterous."

Deb was really beginning to like the old lady. Deb peered into the room by bending down and using the bottom of the window.

"What do you see?"

"Not good.....A desk turned over, filing cabinets opened up, paper everywhere."

"I was afraid of that."

They moved on, Iris keeping back a little, while Deb looked through the edge of the bay windows. Chaos seemed to have visited The Brambles, there was even the remains of a dead body in the centre of the room. Deb sighed and leant against the window, feeling it move slightly.

"That bad?" Asked Ivy.

"Destruction for the sake of it by the look of it. There's even a body, looks like what's left of an old man."

"Oh, dreadful."

"The window is open....I'll go inside and open the doors."

"Have the spanner ready."

"Trust me, anyone comes at me and they'll feel it hit them..... Hard."

The window jammed half open, there was just enough room for her to squeeze through. Once inside the stink of death hit her nostrils, causing her to sneeze three or four times.

"Are you alright dear?"

"Fine Iris, fine."

If there was anyone in The Brambles they must have heard her sneezing or Iris yelling through the open window. Deb held the spanner up, looking for anyone running at her out of the shadows.

"Anyone there?" She shouted.

Silence, probably more peaceful than when a hundred elderly people and their carers were having a singalong in the room, or a game of bingo. There had been a decent looking sound system at one of

the large room, until someone had smashed it to pieces. Iris was tapping on the glass doors that led into the garden. Luckily the key had been left in the lock.

“Ewww it stinks in here.” Said Iris.

“Don’t worry, after a while you won’t notice it. I’m going to look at the body, don’t wander off.”

There was little left of the face, he’d been dead for quite some time. A man in overalls with a large set of keys still on his belt. Probably a maintenance man. Deb wouldn’t have touched him if it hadn’t been for the keys. A large bunch, some even had their own labels. The one marked as stores interested her most.

“Looks like all this happened in the early days of the invasion.” She said. “Mindless vandalism and violence, we’ll never know how the maintenance guy died. Hungry people panicking, going a little crazy probably, they didn’t even take his keys.”

“Where do you think the residents have gone ?”

“I’ve no idea, hopefully they were evacuated before things got really bad.”

“Evacuated to where ?”

“I have no idea..... Did you know someone here after all Iris ?”

“No..... It’s just that if my granddaughter could have afforded it. I’d have been living here, it could have been me..... Here in all this.....”

Deb cuddled Iris for a while, waiting for the sobbing to stop.

“We can’t stay here, it’s too..... Horrible.” Said Iris.

“I know, but it’ll do for today and one night. We need to use the daylight we have Iris. Every door we can open, we will open. There may be food the vandals missed. Carefully though.... Just because no one has come running, doesn’t mean no one is here.”

Deb held up the bunch of keys, showing Iris the one marked stores.

“Stores tend to be near kitchens, do you remember where they are ?”

“No, we weren’t taken around any kitchens.”

“How about a dining room, did they feed you ?”

“Yes, come to think of it they did..... Disappointing, just a few limp sandwiches. I think I can remember where it was.”

“Let me go first, just point the way.”

The corridor was neat and tidy, nothing there to smash apart. A few pictures hanging at weird angles were the only sign all wasn’t as it should be at The Brambles. Deb knew the dining room had been a bit special, even though several of the tables has been smashed apart. None of the rows of uniform tables and chairs she’d seen in council run homes. The dining room had been laid out like a restaurant, at least it had been before the vandals had arrived. Iris found a surviving chair, sighing as she sat down.

“I just need a minute dear.”

Deb wasn’t going to leave Iris alone. She looked around the dining room, noting the bowl of fruit on a counter that was now nothing but a dried out mess. Similarly flowers in a few surviving vases were now just blackened stems. It was encouraging that the chaos seemed to have arrived and left again many months before.

“No more bodies at least. I know we said one night, but if we secure all the doors and windows, it might make a good place to stay for a while.” Said Deb.

“I’d like a shower.....Do you think they have one ?”

“Showers need power, but a bath will fill from a roof tank.” Said Deb. “These sorts of places always have a bath somewhere. Cold water, but if we’re in and out quick. Do you fancy that Iris.”

“Yes, as long as you don’t mind helping me in and out ?”

“I don’t mind..... That’s my job.”

Deb gave the old lady ten minutes before suggesting it was time to find the kitchen. When they did find it the kitchen was encouraging. No obvious signs of damage, pots and pans still immaculately clean and stacked on shelves. The pantry area beyond was a different story.

“They’ve left us nothing.” Said Iris.

Freezers turned over, whatever they’d contained looted. Cupboards open, shelves completely bare. The looters didn’t seem interested in cleaning products, there were two cupboards full of the stuff.

“I was hoping..... When you found the keys.” Said Iris.

“Keep looking, we haven’t found the door for our key yet.”

“It’ll be vandalised, everything is ruined.”

Deb found what she thought might be the door. Tucked into a corner of the main kitchen, it looked unmolested by the looters.

“Iris..... I think I found it.”

The sign wasn’t encouraging, the vandals might have thought it didn’t sound very appetising, or they might have simply missed the door entirely. Iris came up and they both looked at the solid looking door.

“Steam cleaner and dry store.....Is that it ?” Asked Iris.

“I think so, I’ll try the key.”

The key fitted and Deb decided then and there that they were moving into The Brambles for a while. It wasn’t the Harrods food hall, there was a large steam cleaner up against the wall at the far end of the room. The important thing was the metal shelving full of tinned food. Tins were good, you could eat the contents cold without having bad guts for days. Iris had noticed something near the bags of flour and salt.

“Candles, there are boxes of candles.” She said.

“Oh yes, no telling what else we might find.” Said Deb. “These places love their risk planning and health and safety issues. We might even find a cooker fed by a gas bottle somewhere. So..... Are we moving in ?”

“Oh yes dear, we definitely are.”

The old lady held up her knuckles to be bumped. She even did the whole exploding hand and wiggling fingers routine.

“Sometimes Iris.....You amaze me.”

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MacLaren hadn’t been totally sure the idea would work. They were circling the Fifth West base at the tip of Norway, doing what space shuttles weren’t supposed to do. Circling in Lunar gravity was one thing, circling in the full one G of Earth gravity was something else entirely. You could burn through your fuel really fast.

“I’ve tried everything Pam.” She said. “No matter how many times I get Gerald to mark Billy as a friend, the base AI refuses to give you landing rights. They probably don’t have much in the way of ground to air weapons down there, but Billy isn’t designed for battle.”

“Alright, thanks for trying, I’ll land Billy as close to the perimeter fence as I can.” Said Pam. “That means you guys will have to handle the guards on your own.”

“There probably won’t be many. We’ll do our best to convince them to be friendly. I really don’t want to start killing off a few harmless Norwegians.”

Gene was nodding at her furiously. He'd picked six of the students to arm up and go with him. Most of them were fire fight virgins, told many times that a success meant no one dying, especially them. Kitty MacLaren had wanted to go with them, but knew she couldn't. She'd have to stay at the controls, just in case everything went dreadfully wrong and they needed to make a quick getaway. "Gerald is now fully committed to land at..... Bay seven." She said. "Get ready everyone; I'll open the doors from here as soon as we land."

No one seemed to be moving fast enough. Gerald was plushy and new, everything still worked and she had the ability to monitor the whole shuttle. No one was moving with the urgency she considered appropriate.

"Five minutes people, we're burning fuel." She yelled down intercom. "Assault team get your arses to the main hatch..... Now People."

Good, they were now rushing a little. Gerald might have swooped on lunar, but he definitely didn't swoop in Earth gravity. It wasn't his natural environment. As the landing jets came on the fuel gauges had trouble keeping up with the flow.

"Less than a minute." She yelled.

She was sure that even Gerald's AI breathed a sigh of relief when the landing jets cut out. They'd used more fuel landing than in taking off from the moon and the entire journey home. It didn't feel like home, but they were landing in the middle of nowhere, about twenty miles south of Alta in Norway and Alta was probably a one dog town.

"We're down..... Opening outer door." She yelled.

No need to shout of course, she just wanted to give them an idea of urgency. There would still be hot gasses swirling around Gerald, she should have given it a minute or so before popping the door. They were all suited up and anyway, the kids needed toughening up.

"Everyone away." Said Gene. "Jeez the air temperature is minus two, welcome to Norway everyone. Watch your suit temperature."

MacLaren aimed a camera to see their progress. No audio feed, she'd just have the comms feed from Gene and the students. Three or four glorified night watchmen with guns had been their estimate of the defending forces. The people approaching Gene were wearing all terrain suits, though that might have been to survive the weather.

"Careful Gene, they don't walk like bored night watchmen." She said.

Seven approaching guards, all with that certain walk, a certain wariness. Kitty MacLaren picked up her pulse rifle and ran towards the open airlock.

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