

Ishmael

Chapter 18 - Norway

“Vicky turned around and actually smiled at the Autodoc, it was every student’s friend. From a killer hangover to birth control, like a good and discreet buddy, the Autodoc took care of it all.”



As the head of the civilian council Mateo Lopez was on the small list of people to be kept informed of any potential problems in the bunker. He’d brought Marjorie with him, mainly because she shared his healthy distrust of the military. Ray was there of course and a mechanical engineer introduced as Sergeant Wilkins. That was it, just the four of them, looking at the flickering warning lights on the side of the main generator.

“You’re certain it’s the aliens ?” Asked Mateo. “Couldn’t it be a blocked fuel pipe or something ?” Wilkins looked middle aged, old for a soldier. Mateo had met a few engineers who were past normal army retirement age. Either they liked the life, or the army couldn’t afford to lose their expertise. He was obviously old school, looking at Ray for permission to speak.

“Tell them what you’ve found Wilkins.” Said Ray.

“I thought it was probably a fault in the generator, but the backup systems are showing the same faults. It’s outside interference, I’m certain of it. We relied on the depth of soil above the bunker to screen us from the alien devices, not to mention several feet of reinforced concrete. It looks like a device had landed close to us though, perhaps directly overhead.”

Mateo didn’t like the way Ray and Wilkins were exchanging looks.

“How serious is it ?” He asked.

“Are we going to be using candles soon ?” Asked Marjorie.

“It’s more serious than that.” Said Ray.

Once again he nodded at Wilkins.

“The generator is being interfered with in ways I don’t understand, the voltage is no longer smooth and uniform. That is already affecting the freezers and the coolers used to keep medical supplies. Worst still is the damage being done to the filtering and recycling systems for air and water. We’ve already had to replace a control board in the effluent digester and we only have limited numbers of spares. Then there is the damage to the generator itself.....”

“It’s serious, very serious.” Cut in Ray. “Give them the time line Wilkins.”

“I’d say we have a month if we do nothing.” Said Wilkins. “Then the generator will pack up. We have small backup generators to run a few essential systems, but they’re intended simply to give us time to collect everything together before we leave.”

“Leave !” Yelled Marjorie. “Where would we go ?”

“Don’t panic, I’m guessing Sergeant Wilkins has a plan.” Said Mateo. “Or we’d be hearing the contents of the official abandon bunker plan.... I’m sure there must be one ?”

Ray was actually grinning at him. At one time he’d considered Ray a friend, but the bunker had changed everything.

“Oh yes Mateo, the army has contingency plans for everything. Even an appendix listing all the essentials we need to take with us. I’m hoping Wilkins and his team can help us avoid that. Tell them about the chicken wire Wilkins.”

Marjorie was looking at Ray and mouthing chicken wire at him.

"I can't guarantee my plan will work." Said Wilkins.

"Christ !" Snapped Marjorie.

"I want to construct a Faraday cage around the generator." Said Wilkins. "It'll need to be a solid dependable construction, designed to last for decades. I'll need the entire store of corrugated iron and chicken wire."

"Crap..... This is a nightmare." Said Marjorie.

"Cut to the chase Wilkins." Said Ray. "How long and what you hope to achieve."

"First a layer of corrugated iron, then cover it all in chicken wire. It'll all need earthing out of course, but there are plenty of pipes that go into the ground."

"I just hope no one wants to keep chickens once we get out of here." Said Mateo.

Ray was laughing, but Marjorie and Wilkins were just staring at him, open mouthed.

"Sorry..... So what would be your estimate as a chance of it working Wilkins ?" Asked Mateo. "Be honest, I promise to do my best to keep everyone calm while you do it. I'm guessing that is what you want from the civilian council..... Keeping the civilians from panicking."

Again Wilkins was looking at Ray, needing permission to talk, permission to be honest.

"Tell them, they need to know." Said Ray.

"I'd say there's a seventy percent chance it'll cure the problem. At the very least it will almost certainly give us more time. If it works we can build similar cages around the backup generators. We might even need to screen the freezers too."

"So.....Yes, anyone needing to build a chicken shed will be screwed." Said Ray.

Everyone laughed, including Marjorie.

"That is the most ludicrous plan I've ever heard." She said.

"It's the only solution I can think of." Said Wilkins.

"I'm sure it is and we may well name a holiday after you, if it works." Said Mateo. "If you'd said ten percent we'd still have had to agree to it. It's that or get ready to take our families outside. I'll do my best to keep everyone calm."

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Vicky Meadows was feeling dreadful by the time Cassie relieved her. She felt as though she was in the tropics, despite knowing the heat was kept to around twenty one degrees with low humidity.

"You do look bad Vicky." Said Cassie. "Herman thought you were trying it on. I'll talk to him later..... What do you think it is you've caught ? Paul had a cold..... How the hell do we catch colds on Lunar anyway ?"

Vicky stood up and the room shifted about a little. She held onto the back of the chair until her sense of balance returned.

"That damned mouse bit me." She said, pointing. "I'm certain it's given me something nasty."

For a tall muscular woman, Cassie didn't seem too keen on sharing her watch with a mouse, even a dead one.

"Oh Christ Vicky.....Take it to Medical with you and drop it in the incinerator."

"I haven't got anything to put it in."

"Just pick it up by the tail."

Bending and standing back up gave her a few more weird giddy feelings, but she did have the dead mouse by the tail.

"When are you on guard duty again ?" Asked Cassie.

"Not until tomorrow afternoon. I'm sure I'll be alright by then."

“Sorry Vicky, I should have relieved you sooner..... We all thought you were making it up. If you’re unwell tomorrow, call me and I’ll do your shift.”

“Thank you.”

“Jeeezzz you look bad.... Get to the Autodoc right away.”

“I will.”

It wasn’t far to Medical, just three short corridors and one floor down via a ramp. She still managed to drop the dead mouse. Picking it up was a problem, her fingers felt strange, gripping the rodent’s tail was impossible. Vicky gave up and held the mouse in the palm of her left hand, gripping it with all her fingers.

“It’s already bitten me.” She muttered. “Unless it’s a zombie mouse, it can’t do me any more harm.”

The idea of a zombie mouse amused her, she was laughing as the automatic doors opened. Vicky walked into medical and opened the chute for the incinerator. Not intended for anything large of course, mainly just bloody dressings and cotton swabs.

“Bye Mickey.”

In went the mouse, the green light telling her the process of turning the mouse to ash had begun. Vicky turned around and actually smiled at the Autodoc, it was every student’s friend. From a killer hangover to birth control, like a good and discreet buddy, the Autodoc took care of it all. Designed to work in unison with a medical professional, but they didn’t have one of those anymore.

“I am so pleased to see you.” She muttered.

Not that the couch shaped Autodoc understood her, all input was via a terminal and keyboard. It had a drawback if left to work unattended by a physician, one shared by some human doctors. You could go to see it about an ailment and it would ignore that and treat you for something else. Something it considered more important. Vicky leant back on the couch and pulled the terminal up to her chest.

“Crap.... Please cure me quickly....I feel like shit.”

Vicky pressed the large green button to start the clever machine on automatic, there wasn’t much else she could do. Like a well-meaning octopus the Autodoc put out metal tentacles. One held her left wrist, stinging a little as a sterile needle went into a vein. The screen told her she’d been given something to lower her fever. Another tentacle was a scanner, which ran up and down her right side. Something nuzzled against the left side of her neck.... Another sting as a needle went in.

“Ouch.”

As a child the medical machines had scared her. Now she viewed them as friends, buddies who knew what you’d been up to but never betrayed a secret. Vicky trusted the Autodoc to cure her, with as little personal discomfort as possible. She felt surprise more than fear, as more tentacles grabbed her, pinning her to the couch.

‘Biohazard Level Four.’

Was flashing up on the screen, there was even an alarm klaxon sounding somewhere. She tried to move her hand up towards the stop button on the terminal. Panic as the tentacles clamped her wrists harder and the needle in her neck went in deeper.

‘Multiple Unknown Pathogens.’

Came up on the screen, the Autodoc was recommending full quarantine and incineration. It meant her, the fucking machine wanted to burn her.

“Let me go..... Let me go.” She yelled.

Someone had come to investigate, a face was looking through the glass panel in the door. They were pulling and tugging at the door, which was obviously locked. The terminal was talking about putting

her into deep sedation, she felt tired and sleepy. Two words were now coming up on the terminal, over and over again.

'Compromised DNA'

'Compromised DNA'

'Compromised DNA'

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Andy Korenberg had put his ideas into a few books; he assumed everyone knew his intentions. To him the purpose of the Diaspora Eight spacecraft was obvious, yet everyone he talked to seemed to misunderstand. The students from Base Albion were gifted and worked hard. The last thing he wanted to do was cause any waves that might rock the boat. Andy decided to lie by omission, probably the worst kind of lying. Pam Rath was the one to learn the truth first. She'd kept on at him about likely destinations for the small flotilla of spacecraft. Like a dog with a bone, she'd refused to let the matter drop. He understood, it was important.

"I feel quite humbled." He told Pam. "I was too close to the problems that your students have solved quite quickly. It'll be hard work of course and there are the other bases....With luck, I can see the entire fleet being ready to leave Earth in about eighteen months time."

Pam was giving him her puzzled look, he knew the question was coming again. They weren't alone though, Kitty MacLaren was sprawled across the sofa in his office. Andy made a split second decision that if the question was asked, he'd answer it fully and truthfully. He was certain that the universal laws on the speed of gossip, would ensure everyone from Albion would know by the end of the day.

"So Andy, where is the fleet going?" Asked Pam. "Hopefully not Mars, the aliens are bound to have left a garrison there. With craft designed to the specs I've seen, we could..... Please don't tell me we're all going out to orbit Pluto and breed like bunnies."

"We're taking a lot of robots." Said MacLaren. "I think we're going to terraform a moon somewhere. Maybe Io."

It was infuriating, they were both grinning at him like crazed Cheshire cats.

"Have neither of you read my books on the future of mankind?" He asked.

"Of course I have." Said Pam. "Your equations are now accepted throughout the world, I've taught them to more groups of kids than I like to remember."

"Crap..... I know what he means." Said Kitty. "That's purely theoretical..... No one believes it'll actually work."

"What does he want to do?" Asked Pam.

"He wants to travel halfway across the galaxy." Replied Kitty.

"Not quite that far, let me show you." Said Andy.

He had an old fashioned white board in his office, rather than a computer screen that copied finger movements. No copy and save function of course. If he wanted to keep something, he took a picture of the board. He wiped away a formula on fuel consumption during a prolonged high G burn. It had looked so promising, until he'd found the error inside the eighth set of brackets.

"You'll recognise this." He said, while using a dry marker. "Our galaxy, though it's actually a bit more squashed up.....There, that'll do."

The bulbous centre surrounded by loose spirals was recognised by just about everyone who'd passed through any kind of education system.

"We're here." He said, making a dot on one of the spiral arms.

"Good old planet Earth." Said Kitty.

“This is it, the entire area we’re limited too. We have evidence that the aliens can’t exceed the speed of light, so we have to accept Einstein was right, it is a limiting factor. The aliens can probably achieve a significant fraction of the speed of light, possibly as high as point seven. My Diaspora craft can only achieve point six.”

“Wow, I always thought our galaxy was huge.” Said Kitty. “Looking at it like that though.....It’s almost like a prison.”

Andy wasn’t laughing, a few others had made the same kind of comments. That kind of thinking tended to get people talking about religion and he wanted to avoid that.

“It is huge.....The Indian Space Research Organisation probably did the best job of tracking the aliens back home, before the entire world went silent. We believe the aliens came from here.”

He put another dot on the board and drew a line connecting it to the Earth.

“That is closer than I imagined.” Said Pam.

“Still a long way and a straight line doesn’t properly show the distance through a three dimensional galaxy.” Said Andy. “Several light years away, we can assume the young aliens who boarded their armada are now past middle age.”

“Maybe that’s why they sent so many robots.” Said Kitty.

“Perhaps, though why not let robots take all the initial risks ? We’ll see the aliens when their main fleet arrives and I’m partly looking forward to seeing what comes out of those huge craft. I think we’ll be in for a few surprises.”

“Nasty surprises.” Said Pam.

Andy put another dot on the board, one a long way from planet Earth. Again he drew a straight line connecting the dots.

“We’re lucky.” He said. “All the space agencies across the globe have been pooling their data for decades. We know where the stars are that are likely to go supernova relatively soon. We can plot a course that avoids unstable systems..... To get us here.”

He pointed at the distant dot.

“Christ that’s a..... Fucking long way from Earth.” Said Kitty.

“It is, though the best place to find a new home. Computer modelling never gives anything as a complete certainty.” Said Andy. “Here though, this part of the galaxy has so many planets with water and oxygen atmospheres.... The chances of not finding a planet we can live on are practically nil.”

“So that’s it..... We run away and abandon Earth ?” Asked Pam.

“We can’t stay here.”

“He’s right, there’s no alternative.” Said Kitty. “How long to get there ?”

It was the awkward bit, Andy knew it. Ideally he’d have hollowed out a small moon rather than building metal and ceramic spacecraft. Time was against them though and budgetary restraints.

“Look..... I’ll be honest.” He said. “Even the most optimistic computer models say we will lose some craft to collisions with asteroids. Then the aliens are likely to fire on us as we leave Earth. Add on the effect of time on electronic components..... I’m just saying this wasn’t my first choice solution to saving mankind. It is however, the only one that stands a good chance of working.”

“Stop avoiding the question.” Said Pam. “How long to get there ?”

“About three thousand years.”

“Crap !” Said Pam. “So we’re going to breed on the spacecraft and our great, great..... Something or other grandchildren will arrive there ?”

“They won’t be us.” Said Kitty. “Not sure what they’ll be, but in three thousand years, they won’t be us..... Human I mean.”

Andy was looking upon it all as good practise. He'd have to tell everyone at a meeting, even some of his own guards didn't know the full plan. The next bit was going to be easy, the technology worked well and every computer simulation had told him no one was likely to die.

"Pachamama we're calling the planet in our modelling." Said Andy. "It's in a system of a star that only has a number for a name. Pachamama is an Inca Earth Goddess, the name was picked by the child of one of our engineers. The computers will decide if the planet meets our requirements. If it doesn't we'll be left sleeping while automatic systems take us to another solar system."

"Sleeping.....No one has perfected suspended animation on humans." Said Pam.

"Ewww.... I hope you're not going to freeze us." Said Kitty.

"No.....You did ask me about the extra functions on the sleeping couches."

"Yes, you said everyone was going to have their own Autodoc link." Said Pam.

"Hmmm in a way they are." Said Andy. "Each couch will also put its user into suspended animation. Fifth West solved the key problems years ago, the couches work."

"You've tested them?" Aske Pam.

They weren't going to like the next bit, he'd be the Fifth West lackey again, maybe even a monster.

"Testing on volunteers is problematic." He said. "Take two years off anyone's life and you screw up their future. Fifth West contacted a few friendly governments and arranged access to convicts, those serving life sentences."

"Oh, fuck Fifth West Andy, why did you agree to that?" Asked Kitty.

"Stop over reacting MacLaren." Said Pam. "Did the couches work?"

"Yes, far beyond our hopes." Said Andy. "Twelve prisoners were used for the experiment over a period of two years. We picked up a huge amount of useful data over those two years. They all survived, actually better than survived, they came out of it without any muscle loss or ill effects of any kind."

"Are they all still alive?" Asked Kitty.

"Eleven are, one was shot during a robbery a year later." Said Andy. "The build quality is amazing, every couch has so many backup systems. Computer modelling suggests time is immaterial. One year, a million years..... You'll wake up in perfect health."

"Christ..... We're going to do it." Said Kitty. "We're really going to planet whatever it was."

"Pachamama..... Yes we are." Said Andy.

"Supposing it's already home to someone?" Asked Pam. "You're Fifth West, you must have a contingency plan that deals with that."

"Yes, we can't be like the aliens attacking us." Added Kitty

"There are tell-tale electromagnetic signs of advanced technology." Said Andy. "If the systems see any of those, we'll be taken to another solar system."

Here it came, he knew Pam would have to ask.

"Great, but supposing they aren't that advanced. Would we take their planet from them?"

"You're talking about a tiny one in a billion chance Pam." He said.

"But would we?"

"Yes."

"Oh Crap, we'd be no better than the aliens." Said Kitty.

"There is no right or wrong in these things, just survival." He said. "We'll go through this again at a full meeting for everyone. See how many are worried about it then. They'll just want a chance to survive."

"Arsehole." Shouted Kitty.

"No, he's right.....I curse him for it, but he's right." Said Pam.

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The main problem was trying to work out who was calling him; the AI in Mordor Two was still being uncooperative. No, actually the worst problem was the alarms, the constant wail of klaxons and high pitched electronic wailing. Some doors had locked themselves, there was obviously an emergency. He just had no idea what it was.

"Where are you ?..... I said WHERE ARE YOU ?" He yelled.

"Section Theta 4. There's something here, something big.....It killed....."

"Who did it kill ? CAN YOU HEAR ME ?"

Christ ! A female voice, so distorted he hadn't recognised her. Herman persisted, the connection still seemed to be open.

"WHO WAS KILLED ?"

No good, the connection dropped and he still had no idea who the caller was or who had died. His communicator was telling him nothing. So tempting to throw it at the wall, or stamp on it until it stopped accepting calls. Every call seemed to be about someone being attacked. Not being able to help was frustrating. At last, a call with a name next to it.

"Sylvie.... Thank God, are you alright ?"

"Yes, I'm in Engineering Module K. Not good here, Paul was killed."

"What killed him ?"

"Sorry ?"

"WHAT KILLED HIM ?"

"Not sure, it moved so fast. Something big, as big as a man.....He shot it twice and it never slowed down."

"The MAG74s are useless."

"What ?"

"THE MAG74s ARE USELESS."

"No, he was using one of the new pulse rifles..... Shot it twice. Didn't even slow it down."

"Fuck..... Can you do anything about the alarms Sylvie ?"

"Already tried.....The systems are ignoring my commands. Please come here Herman. Engineering Module K..... I'm scared, there aren't many of us left."

"On my way."

"Sorry ?"

"ON MY WAY."

The connection died.

"Fuck !" He shouted.

Two hits from one of the Fifth West weapons and the thing had lived, it was impossible. Unless Paul had missed, he wasn't one of their best people with a weapon. Not that they had that many people left. Herman pushed at the door in front of him and it refused to open.

"Fuck you too." He yelled at it.

He'd already destroyed two doors, using the pulse rifle on a third didn't bother him. The trick was to aim at a downward angle to bury the slug in the ground. After it had destroyed the door of course. Herman switched on the weapon, enjoying the way it buzzed at it came to life. He went up on his toes, aiming down through the glass panel on the door. Not really glass of course, it was a high strength polycarbonate of some kind, designed to look like glass.

"Easy Peasy." He muttered.

There was no more glass, there wasn't that much left of the door. He had to hand it to Fifth West, their weapons didn't fuck about. Two more corridors brought him to a rest area he didn't recognise. Mordor Two was huge and they hadn't been there long. That was another problem, knowing where the hell he was.

"Jeeezzz, what would do that ?" He muttered.

Not the woman he'd been talking to, he wasn't anywhere near Section Theta 4. He had no idea where he was, but he knew Theta 4 was way over the other side of the base. The dead woman was unrecognisable, something had eaten most of her face. He tried his communicator.

"Sylvie, come in."

Nothing.

"Sylvie, I've found another body..... Female this time."

Nothing.

Mordor One had decent signage, but whoever had designed Mordor Two, had decided to make it hard to find your way around. Probably just his own paranoid fantasy of course, but Herman was comfortable with it. He blasted open two more sealed doors, before finding a sign for somewhere he recognised.

'Hydroponics Section H'

There was even a helpful fluorescent yellow arrow pointing through yet another sealed door. A double set of heavy doors, but they weren't designed to resist pulse rifle slugs. He went through the layout of the base in his mind. Hydroponics went through to Comms Main, which eventually led to where Sylvie should be in Engineering Module K. Herman had no plan now other than finding Sylvie and trying to keep them both alive.

"Hey..... You..... Stop !" He shouted.

He'd seen someone at the end of the corridor. Just a hint of movement, a creature about the size of a large man. For all he knew it might have been a man, running away because he was scared.

"Hello..... It's Herman." He yelled.

Herman didn't like running in the base. Running could bring you up close to something you'd rather be avoiding or running away from. He ran though, down the corridor, before turning right into Hydroponics. He saw something again, as it crashed through a set of heavy doors and vanished into the lush vegetation of Green House D.

"Stop."

No man could have literally run through the doors, Herman took a risk and fired three times, trying to keep his aim low. Nothing, no scream as he hit something, no comforting sound of a body hitting the ground. The lush plants kept them fed and helped to clean the air. Now though, they were just a damned nuisance.

"Come out, I can see you." He yelled.

A lie, but it had always worked on him at high school. The creature wasn't that gullible, there was no movement in the indoor jungle. Hydroponics on Lunar was fairly standard, he knew there'd be rails for the machinery that kept everything fed and watered. Narrow paths too, for the engineers.

Herman spotted a path to his left and tried to walk without making a sound. He was certain of one thing, the creature wasn't going to run away. It was a meat eater and there was only one meal for it in hydroponics, him.

He walked down the centre of the path, looking left and right. When the creature did appear, it was right in front of him. Grey skin and it did look a lot like a man. A large man with muscular shoulders

and small dark eyes. The teeth definitely weren't human. More like the teeth of a large rodent, they clicked together as the creature saw him.

"Bastard." Herman mumbled.

Herman had been keeping a mental tally, the pulse rifle still had about ninety slugs to fire. He aimed at the creature and fired three times. Two slugs must have missed, but the third hit the thing in the centres of its chest. A good hit, the sort of hit that should have caused the creature to die. He'd seen blood fly up and pieces of tissue. The speed it ran off at wasn't human or anything he'd seen matched by any other living thing.

"Nothing.....Nothing could have survived that." He muttered.

There was a little blood on the ground where he'd hit the creature, small droplets of red blood.

Debris too, bits of grey skin and a few tiny pieces of tissue.

"Jeeezzzzz."

Herman tried his communicator again.

"Sylvie."

Just crackles.

"Sylvie, use the shuttle and get out of here.....Run."

Nothing, he just hoped she'd heard him.

The lights going out in a section of plants probably saved him, the creature must have snagged a power cable while running towards him. Herman raised his weapon just as the snarling jaw appeared out of the lush green foliage. He fired at least six times, maybe more. His reward was seeing a spurt of blood on the thing's throat and another on the side of its head. It screamed in pain, the damn thing could be hurt.

"That's it run.....I'll find you." He shouted.

It was badly hurt, there was quite a lot of thick red blood on the ground. Nothing seemed to slow it down though, as it ran to his right and vanished into a jungle of vines. He knew the creature was running away, when he heard it crash through another set of heavy doors. Herman checked his weapon and it had seventy slugs left.

"More than enough to get the job done." He muttered.

It meant finding the thing again, but he wasn't working to the clock, no one was paying him by the hours.

Herman knew he was going to die, when he felt the rush of air on his cheek. He sighed and sat on the ground, dropping the pulse rifle.

"Stupid..... You bloody fool."

One or more of his slugs had penetrated the outer wall of Mordor Two. The auto repair systems would try, but they'd fail to stop the catastrophic decompression. Herman hadn't brought the helmet for his suit, it had been just one more thing to carry. A rookie mistake, though having a helmet wouldn't have improved his odds that much. He was going to die and a large section on the base was going to die with him. He'd seen the computer simulations, he'd attended the warning lectures.

"Fuck." He muttered, there wasn't much else to say.

All those doors he'd broken open, all that air to be sucked along in a hurricane. The simulations had shown the way a vortex of air could become twisted in doorways to form small indoor tornadoes.

Herman knew he was going to see it in real life, when the plants began to break away from their containers. He knelt lower and grabbed hold of one of the rails the plant feeders ran along.

"At least it will die too, the thing." He muttered.

The plants became caught against a pillar, until the flow of air became a screaming hurricane of wind. Herman knew it was serious when a fifty litre drum of plant food tumbled past him. He lost consciousness when the wind picked him up and tried to ram him between a titanium supporting strut and the wall.

Herman clung onto life while a tornado swept him up and pushed him through several internal walls. Even being flung onto the surface of the moon didn't immediately kill him. In the end it was impossible to tell if the laboratory bench crushing his head killed him, or colliding with the side of Building C.

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Deb Newman had wanted to make a cake, but the number of fresh ingredients required had put her off that idea. The attempt had proved worth it though, digging through the backroom of a small shop on the edge of Bridlington. She'd been looking for cake mix and found something far better.

"Is my surprise ready yet?" Shouted Iris.

"No, don't you dare come in here."

The tinned fruit cake was almost perfect for the occasion, even if it did have quite a bit of dust on it when Deb had found it. The picture on the tin looked delicious and best of all, it was only a few months past the best before date. Best before and use by dates were something they ignored, though Deb did keep her fingers crossed. Tins were different though, tins granted the contents immortality, everyone knew that.

"Can I come and look?" Shouted Iris.

"No, come in here and I'll..... Do something terrible to you."

The tin hissed as Deb pushed one of their new tin openers into it. Good sign or bad sign? The wonderful smell as Deb opened the tin, told her it had been a good sign. She upended the tin onto a plate and the glorious smell filled the kitchen. The aroma reminded Deb of Christmas.

"I don't know why you have to be so secretive." Shouted Iris.

Only three candles, but those had been another bit of serendipity. They'd been in a plastic card hanging up in a looted corner shop. Deb used one of their precious matches to light the candles. That was it, the surprise was complete. Deb picked up two small plates, two forks and a huge knife to cut the cake. The surprise had been planned for weeks, Deb almost strutted into the dining room with the cake.

"Happy Birthday Iris." She yelled.

"Oh my.....How did you know? I knew it was sometime soon, but....."

"I was your nurse Iris, I saw your date of birth."

In truth Deb only remembered the month, but did it matter? She had been marking off the days in a pocket diary, until it had seemed pointless. Days of the week, days of the month, none of it seemed to matter anymore. Seasons mattered, she knew winter was well on the way. There was a definite winter wind blowing in off the North Sea.

"Go on, you can cut the cake." Said Iris.

"You have to blow out the candles and make a wish."

"Yes.....I wish for..."

"Don't tell me or it won't come true."

Iris Bouvard blew out the candles for her eighty seventh birthday, or as close to the real date as made no difference. Deb cut the cake, which was wonderful. Moist, tasty, with no worrying aftertaste. To wash it down there was a bottle of Chilean red wine, which did have a worrying aftertaste.

“Thank you Deb, the cake is wonderful.”

“Eat the last piece, we still have that mouse problem. Better you eat it than them.”

As she watched Iris eat, Deb realised the old lady and her made a strange pair. They’d done alright though and had a fairly secure home in Bridlington. They’d copied the drugged up crazies, shouting obscenities at anyone who tried to enter The Brambles Care Facility. Deb had even sharpened up a few garden canes to make spears, which they waved at strangers who came too close. Only one man had persisted in trying to get in and they’d buried him in the back garden.

“Do you want to know what I wished for ?” Asked Iris.

“Tell me and the wish fairy will get angry.”

“I’m eighty seven now and I want to go home before I die.”

That surprised Deb, she thought Iris liked their home as much as she did. The drugged up crazy people were a little too close for comfort of course. Other than that, the Brambles was a secure and comfortable home. They could even have a bath once every two months or so, until the roof tank started to run low.

“It’s a long way to walk Iris, there’ll be no trucks or working cars by now.” Said Deb. “Winter is approaching too, lots of snow and ice to trudge through. Plus.....I hate to say it, but we’re unlikely to find any of your family still there.”

“I know, I may keep talking about finding a phone to call them, but I know. I’m not talking about walking right across Yorkshire, just as far as Filey. I was born there, my first real childhood memories are of Filey.”

Deb knew how far up the coast Filey was, she’d seen it on numerous road signs. Depending on which sign you believed it was either ten miles or twelve miles from Bridlington. Not a huge distance, but walking, carrying everything they possessed, with Iris just having had her eighty seventh birthday....Then there was winter to deal with.

“Do you know anywhere we could stay once we get there ?” Asked Deb.

“No, I haven’t lived there since I was a teenager. Filey is a quiet places though, there will probably be less crazies there.”

“I think we’ll find crazies everywhere.....I need to think about it Iris.”

“Fine, we could always wait until spring.....Or not go at all if you don’t want to.”

“I have an idea.....Something I saw in a shop front near Havelock Street. We can go and have a look at it tomorrow.”

“What is it ?” Asked Iris.

“Tomorrow.....See what you think of the idea.”

“Oh Deborah Newman, you can be so infuriating.”

“I Know, I work at it.....Shall we open another bottle of wine ?”

“That would be nice.”

~ ~

Sylvie Barachin had been sitting in the dim glow of the emergency lighting since the generators had packed up. Not just the main generators, even the backups had failed when about half of Mordor Two had been destroyed.

“Herman, are you there ?”

The base AI had told her Hydroponic had been at the centre of a massive explosive decompression. A good part of Engineering had gone with it and about half of the crew’s quarters. Damage had spread, until the advance AI had died when the power supply to the computer core failed.

“Herman, are you there ?”

She'd seen it before all the internal cameras had lost power. She'd seen the dreadful creature that looked part human and part something far more primitive. A long jaw with sharp biting teeth, it had even had a short tail. For all she knew it might still be in the base somewhere, slowly freezing to death.

"Herman, are you there ?"

Sylvie didn't have a suit or a decent weapon. She had a MAG74, though everyone knew they were useless. She could turn it on herself once the cold became intolerable, but she knew she lacked the courage to do that. Besides, she'd once heard that freezing wasn't a bad way to go. According to one of the Russian students she'd met, it was like going into a deep sleep, a permanent deep sleep.

"Herman, are you there ?"

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