

Ishmael

Chapter 12 – Bridgnorth Road

“A large cruise ship just off the coast, probably heading for somewhere on the continent. Every porthole was brightly lit, every walkway full of coloured lights. Too far to hear any sounds, but Liza imagined the sound of an orchestra playing.”



“I really need to be there, seeing it for myself.” Said Ishmael McGrath.

There had been more resistance than expected and quite a few casualties. Inka Malovic had talked about seeing something hit the ground near Hagley, but the alien structure was on Bridgnorth Road, out past Wollaston. It happened at times of stress, people made mistakes.

“They’re doing alright Ish.” Said Biff. “They aren’t that far away from the building now.”

“We’re a day behind schedule.”

Biff tutted at him, but she didn’t remind him yet again that the schedule was his and didn’t take into consideration how desperate the aliens were to protect the structure. Drones had arrived from the north, probably sent from another alien structure near Stafford. Even with the new weapons the fighting had been hard and Peter had inadvertently filmed the deaths of several Fifth West fighters.

“Can we come in ?” Asked Inka Malovic. “The guards said it’s up to you.”

Inka and her kids had spent hours with them the day before. Not an ideal place for her and her children, but Inka had refused to be evacuated to a refugee camp to the south.

“Such places have a habit of becoming permanent.” She’d told them. “I’m staying here until it’s safe to return home and my children are staying with me.”

No one else in the camp wanted two energetic teens under their feet, so Inka and the kids had become their problem. Not that Ish didn’t have a little empathy for them, even if it was buried quite deep.

“Fine, come in just don’t watch the screens.” He said.

“We saw terrible things from the upstairs windows of our house.” Said Kata.

“Then you don’t need to see that kind of thing again.” Said Biff.

Poor Kata, she physically shuddered as she shook her head. Thirteen year old Antun was holding his sister’s hand and still looking a little like a rabbit caught in the headlights. Ish knew something guarantee to make them both smile. The command centre had a working fridge, a rare thing inside the electrical dead zone.

“There are still a few cans of fizzy stuff in the fridge.” He said.

“Yay.” Yelled Antun.

Biff caught Inka as she went to join in with her children pillaging the fridge.

“They might hear things, but that can’t be helped.” Said Biff. “Just keep them on the far side of the screens, it’s probably going to be a bad day in Stourbridge.”

“I will, they’ve already seen far too much for ones so young.” Said Inka. “Did you find anything in Hagley ? I know what I saw.”

“Not yet, but we did send a small team to take a look.” Said Ish.

“It is near where my plane had problems.” Added Biff. “We are taking it seriously..... It’s just that we need everyone for the attack in Stourbridge.”

Peter was back on the big screen, or at least his voice was. His camera was panning left to right, showing the top of a blueish grey building in the distance.

"I know this area, or rather I did before all this happened." Said Peter. "They landed right on top of where The Plough Inn used to be. You can still see a few burned out cars in what's left of the car park."

"At least the area looks fairly open, lots of empty ground." Said Ish.

"It wasn't there were rows of terraced housing here." Said Peter. "The aliens have flattened everything in about a half mile radius."

"All those poor people." Muttered Inka.

Ishmael had never known the area. All he could see was flattened ground and rubble. The only building still standing was the one built by the aliens. The kids couldn't see the screen, but they could hear Peter.

"There was a retirement home near there." Said Kata. "Gemma's grandfather lived there."

"I can hear the Malovic family are with you today." Said Peter.

"We're justifying it as local intel." Said Biff.

A large thirty foot wide saucer shaped drone went low over Peter's head, far too quick and low for anyone to shoot down.

"We've had that a few times, they usually come back for an attack run." Said Peter. "I'm being waved forward, this advance should get us to the alien structure."

Peter had to have been wearing a heavy backpack, they heard it clanking as he followed the other soldiers. The ground was uneven, his camera wobbled around as he advanced. Every step brought him closer to the alien building.

"It's a huge structure." Said Biff.

"And at least a third of it is below the edge of the crater." Said Peter.

Fifty yards brought him to a deep trench that needed to be avoided. They'd seen a similar hole in the ground the previous day and Ish was grateful the kids couldn't see it. The distorted voice meant Peter was holding a cloth over his nose.

"Decomposition is worse than in the other trenches we've seen." Said Peter. "At least two hundred bodies, mostly civilians going by the items of clothing that remain. It looks a bit wasteful for creatures feeding on human flesh..... Would you like the opinion of a lowly grunt?"

It was Peter's sense of humour, he knew full well he was their well respected eyes and ears on the ground.

"Tell us your pearls of wisdom Peter?" Said Ish.

"Our bodies burn fatty tissue to make energy, right? Tell me if that's crap."

"You're right." Said Biff.

"These alien creatures chew up the fat first, we've seen them do it. If disturbed they chew up the fat first and store it as a mush inside their bodies."

Inka was holding her hands over Antun's ears, as Kata covered her own.

"We think everything we've seen so far are just robots of some kind." Said Ish. "You might be right, they might be gathering our soft tissues to use as a power source."

"Not a nice thought, we found what was left of three of our people yesterday." Said Peter.

Another ten yards and the saucer shaped drone came back, firing a laser weapon in Peter's direction. The screen became a chaos of running people and the sounds of war. It all came to an end with Peter's camera aiming at the burnt side of a garden wall.

"It's down.....Mercer got it....." Someone was yelling.

“Peter are you alright ?” Asked Ish.

“You can’t die, we need our lowly grunt.” Said Biff.

The camera wobbled and moved to pan over to where the alien drone had half buried itself in the ditch full of decomposing human remains. Peter was coughing, the deep cough of a man clearing dust out of his throat.

“I know..... Think of the paperwork if I die.” Muttered Peter.

His camera moved forward as he stood up. There was the body of a young woman they’d had breakfast with a few times back in London. Ish cursed himself for not remembering her name.

Peter’s hand moved forward, taking the ID pendant from around her neck.

“It’s Maribeth.” Said Peter. “I hate to sound paranoid, but I think that attack was meant for me.”

“We know they track our comms.” Said Ish. “Just keep your head down.”

“I intend to.”

Apart from the ground becoming rougher and harder to walk across, nothing of note happened as Peter covered the distance to the alien building. The semi slide down the side of the crater probably looked more fun on screen than it was in real life. Peter grunted and held up half a house brick.

“You don’t want to know what part of me just collided with this.” He said.

He walked up to a blue octagonal panel on the wall and struck it with his gloved hand. It made a metallic sound.

“Ok, you and your super senses are in charge now Ishmael, where do I go ?”

Peter turned and his camera showed at least two dozen well-armed soldiers. Some were facing up the crater, watching for trouble. All of them were there to assist Peter and get him safely where he needed to be.

“Stop turning Peter, you’re making me giddy.” Said Ish. “Alright, walk to your left and I’ll tell you where to stop.”

Ish had felt the alien’s memory several times in his dreams. He knew exactly where would give Peter the quickest and easiest route to the alien creature. The creature had been agitated about Peter for quite some time now, it knew the Fifth West soldiers were coming and had a pretty good idea who they were coming for.

“Stop Peter...There the light blue triangular panel is a doorway.” Said Ish.

The panel was huge, a good twenty feet tall. Peter hit it with his hand and produced a dull hollow sound.

“How do I open it ?”

“You don’t, it’ll need demolition charges to smash it open.” Said Ish.

“Great, we’ve got plenty of those.”

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With hindsight suggesting the Isle of Sheppey had probably been a mistake. Liza Bates had never been there, but one of their neighbours had a caravan there and seemed to love the place. An island just off the Kent coast and linked to the mainland by a bridge. It had sounded good when she’d talked it over with Tyler and the kids. Now the decision didn’t seem so good, but Liza comforted herself with knowing that they’d seen far worse places on the drive there.

“Nothing left on the shelves, not even a pot noodle.” Said Tirsa.

Only a small supermarket next to the office on a caravan park, but they’d hoped to find something to add to their food supplies. People on Sheppey seemed to be digging in for the duration, one old guy had even threatened them with a shotgun, though he might have been bluffing. The shop had one thing left, a map on the wall.

"There, where the road ends." Said Liza. "A lot of amusement arcades and two large pubs. There must be somewhere we can sleep tonight."

"Sorry, but it looks like we're back on the road tomorrow." Said Tyler Bates. "We can follow the coast and try Whitstable or Herne Bay."

"I don't mind being in the truck, it's fun." Said Zane.

Someone shouted a few unpleasant racist comments as they got back in the truck. Their kids winced, but it was nothing Liza hadn't heard before. Fear and hunger were bringing out the worst in people. They followed the road, which seemed to be the only main road. When the road stopped not that far from the sea, the entire Bates family were eager to explore.

"Stay together." She said. "People can get nasty if they think someone has come to take what little they have left."

One amusement arcade had been burned to the ground and another had been badly vandalised. Not a single arcade seemed to have any glass left in the windows or the machines. Coins hadn't been taken, the ground was covered in hundreds of coins, everything from small change to two pound coins. Zane was picking some up, but he'd never find anywhere to spend them.

"Come on son, it's dusk already..... We'll see if either of the pubs have a room we can sleep in." Said Tyler.

"A room each would be nice and a hot shower." Added Tirsia.

Tonya their thirteen year old daughter was unusually silent. She'd picked up some kind of tummy bug and hadn't been well for days. They were all worried about her, but with no doctors.....It was bound to get better of its own accord and her kids were tough.

"Bruce's Inn looks to have seen better days." Said Tyler. "Still..... They do have a vacancies sign on what's left of the front door."

If it was a joke, it was in bad taste. The light was fading and no one wanted to spend a night huddled together in the truck. So far they'd always managed to find somewhere reasonably safe to sleep. Tyler led them into the main bar of Bruce's Inn and it too had been vandalised. Not a single glass seemed to have escaped intact and the floor was covered in broken bottles.

"Might have been kids, before things got really bad." She said.

It had the look of something that had happened a while ago. There was dirt on top of dirt and someone had trailed in mud which was now dry. None of the damage looked recent, which Liza chose to consider encouraging. Zane was behind the bar counter, looking at the shelves. He proudly produced half a dozen full bottles of tonic water.

"I knew there had to be a reason for bringing him." Said Tonya.

"Hey..... Feeling better honey?" Asked Liza.

"A bit.....A bottle of water might help."

"Tonic water..... It'll taste a bit strange." Said Zane.

If anyone thought that they didn't say. The whole family drank warm tonic water in a ruined pub as dusk became the full dark of night. As was their tradition, Zane became King of the family for an hour. A title given to whoever had added the last item to their dwindling food and drink supplies. He quickly gave his first royal proclamation.

"As your ruler, I suggest we find a room upstairs to sleep in."

It meant using the precious flashlights which burned through batteries at an alarming rate, but they needed somewhere safer than a wrecked bar. Tyler in front, they all climbed the stairs to the second floor, the only other floor in the building. Again it didn't look like recent damage, but the vandalism was extreme. Someone had even taken a crap in the middle of what was probably the owner's

double bed. Two more ruined bedrooms and Liza wouldn't have let a dog sleep in either of them. The hooligans had probably moved on long ago, but she wasn't taking a chance with her kid's lives. "I know it'll be awful, but we're sleeping in the truck tonight." She said.

"Oh no mum, I don't mind sleeping in here." Said Tonya.

"As your ruler I proclaim....." Began Zane.

"Alright, cut it out." Said Tyler. "If your mum says we're all the truck for the night, you know what that means....."

"We're all in the truck." Her kids said in perfect harmony, but with zero enthusiasm.

The truck was cramped during the day and there was no room for anyone to lie down. It was poor Tonya with the dodgy tummy who saved the day, though no royal title followed her discovery. Her kids were adapting to the savage lifestyle quite well, probably too well. Tonya had borrowed a flashlight to find a quiet corner to ease the problems associated with a tummy complaint, she needed to crap.

"Come and see what I found."

It was a trapdoor, so well hidden that it had taken young eyes and a bright flashlight to spot the slightly uneven ceiling tiles.

"What Tonya ? I can't see anything." Said Tyler.

"I see it, there's trapdoor dad." Said Zane.

Luckily the ceiling wasn't that high and there was an undamaged wooden chair. Tyler held Zane as he pulled at the edges of the trapdoor. There was a pull cord for a set of steps and a lot of dust came down with the steps.

"I doubt if anyone has been up there for years." Said Tyler. "Stay here though, while I look around." Her husband wasn't gone for that long.

"I found out what Bruce does with his junk." He said. "It's all in the loft. Looks safe though."

Liza hung back as Tyler showed the kids around the huge loft. She pulled up the stairs and pushed home the two bolts on the inside of the trapdoor. For the first time since..... Actually since she'd seen the plane crash in Wood Green, she felt safe.

"Come on..... You must see this mum, we can have a bed each." Shouted Tonya.

There were no partitions, just areas separated by stacks of boxes and old furniture. The one really noticeable feature was the sheer number of mattresses on the floor.

"Either a club house for their kids or the unofficial low price accommodation." Said Tyler. "Not much in the way of bedding, but we're used to sleeping in our clothes."

"Wow, my own bed again." Said Tonya. "Can we stay here for a while ? Please."

"We'll see.....If we can find a shop with some tinned food." Said Tyler.

"Hey, there are boxes of crisps over here." Shouted Zane.

"Be careful of the use by dates, not even crisps last forever." Said Liza. "Holes in packets and boxes are something to look for too, have they been nibbled ?"

"Oh mum !" Shrieked Tirsa.

Her daughter was clinging onto one attitude from their civilised life, her hatred of rats.

"Don't Oh mum me..... There are rats and they do nibble stuff."

"Water too, big bottles of fizzy water." Said Zane. "Someone must have put it up here and forgotten about it all."

"Oh.....Bovril flavoured crisps..... No wonder they put them up here." Said Tirsa.

"Dates, check dates on everything." Said Liza. "I don't want you all having a bad case of the shits in the morning."

“Oh mum !” Said Tirsa, again.

Liza Tyler had her own thing about rats. She walked around the loft, stamping her feet in the darkest corners. There might be rats and there might be pigeons, but all of them tended to avoid people if you let them know you were there. Satisfied that she'd given notice to any unwanted residents, she re-joined her family. Of course they were all drinking the water and eating huge quantities of Bovril flavoured crisps. Tyler held up a bag, pointing at words she couldn't even see in the dark.

“Three months out of date, that's nothing for crisps.” He said.

“They're a bit soggy.....But taste alright.” Added Zane.

She joined them, after filling her hands with bags of crisps and a large bottle of fizzy water. Not that much of an evening meal, but a banquet compared to some nights since leaving Tottenham. The crisps tasted a bit odd and the water was slightly flat. Liza just hoped everyone wasn't throwing up before morning.

“Can we stay here for a while ? There's plenty of food.” Said Tonya.

“Just for a few days mum..... It would be nice.” Said Tirsa.

Tyler leant across and whispered in her ear.

“We can't live on crisps forever, but a day or so won't hurt.”

“Fine, we'll stay on Sheppey for a few days.”

“Yay.” Yelled Tonya.

She deliberately tried not to fall asleep for a while, just in case the huge quantities of crisps made anyone ill. It had to be after midnight when she joined Tyler on a mattress in front of a window. A grubby looking window, but it would let enough light through to tell them when the sun came up. It felt as though she'd only been asleep for a few minutes when Tyler woke her.

“Why ?..... Is it one of the kids ?”

“No, I just knew you'd want to see this. It's insane really, but wonderful.”

The window was filthy, but Tyler had rubbed something over it and it gave a good view of the sea. They must have thought the aliens wouldn't bother with a civilian vessel, or they still didn't believe the attack was that bad yet.

“They're lit up like a Christmas tree.” She muttered.

“Crazy of course, a sitting duck if they're seen.”

A large cruise ship just off the coast, probably heading for somewhere on the continent. Every porthole was brightly lit, every walkway full of coloured lights. Too far to hear any sounds, but Liza imagined the sound of an orchestra playing. It was nice to think there were people on the ship who'd sat down to a proper three course meal and were ending the night with a brandy, while listening to the orchestra.

“Be honest..... Do you ever think things will go back to normal ?” She asked.

“No, not for us.....Maybe for the kids..... I'm not sure.”

Liza Bates fell asleep after watching the cruise ship gradually vanish over the horizon.

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Matt Newman's helicopters landed at the wrong end of Dundee Downs. Luckily everyone knew about Brenda, the British lady who was helping to run the medical centre. A few locals mentioned the perils of getting on the wrong side of her, but they said it with a smile on their faces. It was the children who led them through the trees and along the side of flooded paths.

“We'll show you, the medical centre isn't far.”

Chris Crawford hadn't said much since leaving Gunther Springs. The Australian cop hadn't been that talkative at the best of times and after they'd found the blood stains at Margaret's house, he'd

become almost completely silent. Finding identifiable bodies might have been better; at least there could have been a burial. The blood stains hinted at dreadful events in the house, but gave no closure. Two of his soldiers had literally put Chris on one of the helicopters, or he'd still have been searching every corner of Gunther Springs.

"There it is." Said a child, pointing.

The medical centre didn't look much, but it was nice to see a few buildings still standing. Smiling people too and a civilian helicopter parked outside. A small dark haired woman saw them first. She pointed them out to someone, who ran into the medical centre. It was all a bit of an anti-climax when Brenda Grundy simply looked out of the medical centre door and waved at them. There were hugs of course, even Chris joined in, before wandering off on his own.

"Is he alright?" Asked Brenda.

"He lost some people who mattered to him."

"I'm sure we all have, but at least he knows about it." Said Bren. "It might be a curse to know, but I'd like to know if my family in England are still alive."

Matt had tried not to think too much about events back home. His wife was a nurse though, hopefully hard at work inside a well-protected hospital.

"Sorry Matt, have you heard from Deb recently?" Asked Bren.

"I haven't heard from anyone back home in a long time. Chris and I are now officially part of the Northern Australia defence forces."

"Sounds impressive, though I have to ask....I'm glad to see you again, but why come here?"

Why indeed? The idea of getting the team back together had sounded great before he'd actually found Brenda. Now it felt a little lame. She already seemed to have found somewhere to be of use in a war no one really understood.

"We're getting the band back together." He said.

He was ready to cringe if she didn't get the joke, but luckily she did. There was an introduction to the small dark haired woman, who was Michelle Pumpa. Michelle made a point of telling him several times, that she was just a medical assistant who usually only helped out at weekends. After a bit of toing and froing it was decided that Matt's soldiers had the most rations, so they made a meal for the good people of Dundee Downs, or at least those in the vicinity of the medical centre. It was quite late at night before Bren found him to continue their conversation.

"So Matt, are you here to remind me I'm still a serving member of His Majesty's armed forces?"

"That was sort of the idea, though I did feel bad about leaving you in Darwin. I heard about the trouble there.... Actually we both did, Chris wanted to come and find you too."

Bren passed him a bottle of decent wine, probably a present from a grateful patient. The more he thought about it, the less likely it seemed that Bren would want to leave the medical centre. He drank straight from the bottle and gave it back to her.

"So that's it then, you just called in on your way to somewhere else?" She asked.

"The aliens have built a tower just south of Maningrida. That can be seen from a distance and it doesn't take a huge leap of imagination to assume it's causing the electrical dead zone in that area. Less easy to confirm are rumours of them digging into the ground near Ramingining. It might be mining, or they might be up to something else. We're going to look at both locations and destroy the tower if we can."

"Sounds good.... And the new weapons really work?"

“They do, I’ve seen an experienced Fifth West guy bring down a large alien on his own. Three shots Bren and the thing fell to the ground. We’re not running away all the time now, we’re taking the fight to them.”

“I was hoping we’d get round to talking about you wearing a Fifth West uniform.” Said Bren. Matt had almost forgotten he was wearing it, a uniform is fairly invisible to the person wearing it. The material felt comfortable and fitted better than anything the British army had ever given him. “The Australian army took a lot of casualties early on.” He said. “Darwin alone was a disaster, hundreds of experienced soldiers were killed. Fifth West came along with resources and weapons that killed the aliens.”

“It all sounds good news..... When are you leaving ?” Asked Bren. “If you can spare a few, we could really do with a few of your ration packs.”

He had intended to give her the whole ‘for King and Country’ speech, but decided not to.

“I’d like you to join us Bren.” He said. “We’ve some tech you’d love and to be honest, we need someone with your expertise. Your choice though, stay here if you want to. Either way I will leave as much food here as we can spare.”

Bren went silent on him, rubbing her worn out sneakers through the loose soil. He’d known her a long time, silence always meant she was considering her options. When she looked at him, he couldn’t read her expression.

“When will you leave ?” She asked.

“In the morning, after breakfast.”

“Alright, I’ll go with you.”

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It’s strange how something that doesn’t seem to matter, can begin to make so much unravel. Norma wasn’t that keen on going through the armoury with MacLaren. Nice big weapons were useful, but Norma had a thing about tinned hot dogs and there hadn’t been a single tin in Mordor One. Tinned Tuna too if there was any, but she badly needed hotdogs, the way some people needed their morning coffee.

“I knew there had to be some, find something to put them on.” She said

Baxter was in awe of her and had a crush on her, she could tell. It made him perfect material to boss about and do her bidding for a while.

“Like what ?” He asked.

“This is a dry goods store, there must be a barrow around. Use your initiative Leo.”

He was looking in the right direction but not moving.

“Gene told us to never go anywhere on our own.”

It was time to touch his arm and give him her sweetest smile.

“Please Leo, I really do appreciate you helping me.”

He went and Norma said a silent prayer that whatever deity might really exist, would keep a special eye on Leo Baxter until he’d found a barrow. She fondled the top box in the stack of three, before pulling up the top. The brand of hot dogs she preferred and enough tins of them to keep her addiction satisfied for years. She pulled a tin out of the box and smiled at the very long use by date. Leo might have been infatuated with her, but she was deeply in love with the boxes of tinned hot dogs. She was so busy looking at the tin, that she nearly missed Leo cursing and the noises that followed.

“Are you alright Leo ?” She yelled.

No answer, just a noise that sounded like someone vomiting.

"Please don't let him be dead, or eaten." She muttered.

If he was dead it would be her fault and Gene might never trust her to do anything again. Some said the MAG74s were useless. It was all she had, so she held it up and ready. She found Leo very much alive and being sick against the wall.

"Are you alright ? What happened ?" She asked.

She had to be patient, he was still vomiting. Officially the stores had been searched, but no one was really looking for hidden doors. At the end of some metal shelving, a section of wall had opened up.

"I must have pushed against something as I pulled at the barrow." Said Leo.

Why the vomiting ? The dead man was sat at one of the computer terminals in the room. He had a gun on his lap, a cordite bullet firing, large calibre revolver. Banned in space of course, but he had one.

"Call MacLaren, tell her what we found."

"Alright..... Will we get in trouble ?"

"Oh Leo..... Just call her, she'll want to see this."

Norma wasn't brave at all, but the man didn't look as though he'd been dead for that long. No bad smell, no discolouration of the skin. Some of it would have been the filtered and relatively bug free air in Mordor Two, but he looked too fresh to have been a corpse for very long. Norma felt his face with her fingers.

"He's cold, but the flesh is still firm."

"Ewww." Replied Leo.

The man had locked himself in the room, or someone had locked him in by jamming the door with the barrow.

"I think he died while we've been here, probably died of thirst."

No answer, but she could hear him calling someone. Hopefully MacLaren would soon be there, she'd know what to do. There was a memory wafer pushed into the terminal. Not the usual military kind, a civilian version that could be bought over the counter at most computer stores.

"I think he was doing a little unofficial data copying."

"I'm not coming in there Norma.....MacLaren is on her way. Anything else I can do ?"

"Yes, put my boxes of hot dogs on the barrow."

"Yes still want them, after..... This ?"

"Of course I do. Come on Leo, you know how much I love them."

"Alright."

The data on the wafer wasn't even encrypted. Within a few seconds Norma knew she was never going home again and neither was Leo. It was a company called Fifth West who'd been experimenting on the alien creatures, they'd known about them for decades. They'd known but never told anyone. It wasn't just the creatures they'd been experimenting on. The man in the chair had been a senior science officer, a Dimitri Minasyan. There was a light red colour to his cheeks, it looked almost like he'd been using blusher. Norma now knew the significance of that light red blush.

"Have you finished Leo ?"

"Yes."

"Come back to the door, I need to talk to you."

"I'm not going in there again."

"You don't have to, just come to the door."

Norma had access to a comms uplink from the terminal and she used it to send a copy of the wafer to MacLaren, Billy, Pam, Richard, Gene and anyone else she could think of. Routing might be slow for

the people in Mordor One, but they'd get the data eventually. The contents of the wafer had killed Dimitri, her and Leo. Some good had to come out of that, people had to know. She went to the door and found Leo sat on top of a crate full of breakfast cereal.

"You must have seen the body Leo. Did you touch it?"

"No, seeing it was bad enough."

"But you were in there, quite close to him?"

"Yes I fell against him....Now will you stop going on about it?"

Norma lifted her MAG74 and fired once, creating a small clean hole right through Leo's head. The weapon might have been useless against an alien, but it had killed Leo Baxter easily enough. She used his communicator, it was already set to call MacLaren.

"Are you alright Leo? We heard someone firing. We're not far away, with you in five minutes."

"It's Norma, I'm afraid Leo is dead. I just killed him."

"What? Tell me what's going on Norma?"

"You should have a data file by now. It's quite long, but you only need to read the summary. Don't come near the stores MacLaren, you'll see why."

Poor Leo, his dead eyes seemed to be full of accusation and looking right at her. There had been no alternative though. Norma moved so that she could no longer see his lifeless face.

"Christ, it was them..... Fucking Fifth West." Said MacLaren.

"Yes, my DNA has been compromised, I can already feel some of the symptoms. I don't think it's airborne, but I can't be sure. Leave here MacLaren, leave as quickly as you can."

"What will you do Norma?"

"I'm not a brave person and I've seen a picture of what I will become. You know what I'm going to do MacLaren."

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There had been lighting in the building. No windows though and the lighting had gone off after they'd walked a few yards down the first hallway. Walking forward into total darkness was bad enough, without the strange taste to the air he was breathing.

"Careful what weapons they use in there, you're not far from him." Said Ish.

"Him?"

"Ignore him, he calls cars she." Said Dora.

"Listen everyone, this is important." Shouted Peter. "No explosives in here, we're getting close to the alien."

"About time, the air isn't right in here." Someone muttered.

They did have lights, but the metal robots homed in on any light source. Image intensifiers needed some kind of light, even if it was just a few photons. They'd gone back to old fashioned infra-red devices and hadn't lost anyone in a while.

"No, not there." Ish hissed in his ear. "Carry on and turn right at the next opening. He's getting nervous Peter, he knows you're getting close."

"Should we expect any traps Ish?"

"Be careful, but I don't think so. No human was ever supposed to get past the external defences and I'm picking up a lot of fear from our alien friend."

"And from me Ish, and from me." Said Peter.

No temptation to enter any of the rooms they passed, all of them were in total darkness. Infra-red showed a few items of machinery, but no details. It didn't feel that alien, apart from the strange

odour that filled everywhere. Ish had told him it might well be a secretion from the alien as it became agitated. He hadn't passed that piece of information onto the other soldiers.

"Movement ahead, more robots." Someone called out.

The robots were fairly easy to deal with. Two shots from the silent electrical interference weapons and they became just heaps of scrap metal to push out of the way.

There was no door on the room, internal doors were rare in the building, they'd only seen about two while following Ish's direction to the alien.

"You're there, he hears you..... Keep walking straight ahead." Said Ish. "You'll need to use lights now."

Peter and all the other Fifth West fighters had lights fixed to their helmets.

"Ok everyone, time to use our lights." He yelled.

His eyes didn't like the sudden flood of light. He closed his eyes and waited for the light getting between his eyelids to be a little less painful.

"Jeeezzzz..... What the crap is this thing?" Someone said.

"Is that what we came for?"

"Calm down everyone, let's have a look at what we caught." Said Peter.

Ish had seen the camera feed, he was getting very excited and talking far too quickly. Dora was talking at the same time, which wasn't helping.

"One at a time please Ish..... What did you want me to do?"

"Walk right round it for me please. Once at a few feet away and then again close, as close as you can."

Peter didn't like the smell coming from the creature, it was sweet, sickly and unpleasant. Walking round it did give him a chance to get a good look at it.

"It's got tubes connected to it." He said. "They're coming out of these spheres, can you see them?"

He moved his head, hoping to get a good image of the spheres for Ish.

"Yes, we see them." Said Dora.

Peter had never seen anything quite like the alien, apart from maybe a grub of some kind. He'd once dug up a few daddy long legs grubs in the back garden when he was a kid, Ginny Spinners his dad had called them. If the alien could be said to resemble anything that had been born on Earth, it looked like one of those grubs.

"How long is it Peter? Scale is a problem for us."

"Eight feet or so Ish and about two feet wide. It's got legs too, though they're tucked underneath."

There probably was a head end, though it was likely to need a whole science team to decide which it was. The creature moved a little as he moved in to within a foot of it.

"Definitely legs and feet, quite a few of them." Said Peter. "It doesn't like me being this close, shall I move back?"

"No, move closer, see what it does."

The smell was dreadful as he moved his helmet camera to within a few inches. Silly to do it, but once he was that close it was irresistible. He ran his hand over the alien creature, stroking it like an ugly, smelly pet animal.

"Wow, that was..... Unexpected." Said Dora.

The alien's skin began to vibrate and it emitted a sound. It was as if a million crickets were trying to be heard at the same time and it went on until Peter's ears hurt.

"Did I just make a connection?"

"No Peter you terrified it." Said Ish. "You need to get it out of there and do it quickly. That noise was probably a scream for help."

"Get it out..... You've seen the size of it and there are the tubes connecting it to the spheres. Can I disconnect those?"

He heard Ishmael and Dora gasp at the same time.

"No, they're probably how it survives in our atmosphere. Strap them to it in some way and keep them supported." Said Ish. "The main force are at the football ground, I'll have them send over a truck."

"Why invade a planet where you can't breathe the air?" He asked.

"No idea, that's why we need to take it somewhere safe and study it. This is important Peter, you need to get him out of the building and onto the truck." Said Ish.

"And it needs to be alive." Added Pandora.

"Fine.... You can trust me, we'll get it on that truck."

The alien was wriggling and the smell seemed to be getting worse. They were going to have to get up close and physical to carry the creature out and onto the truck.

"Ok people." He yelled. "Clear the wrecked robots to one side of the hallway, we're carrying this guy out of here."

"Encourage him to use those legs." Said Ish. "That might help."

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By the time Pam Rath reached the outer airlock she had six scared looking students in front of her. The problem had been knowing who was on their side, there were no uniforms or badges in their small war. Pam had begun to trust anyone who dropped their weapon and asked to join them. A mistake, one student had tried to knife her. Now all students were considered to be dangerous. Richard helped her search them for weapons, but he wouldn't help her push them along in front at gunpoint. His self-appointed role was rear guard and he'd cried when he'd had to shoot one of their students.

"Suit up and do the usual checks." She said. "We're going to use Billy to get back to Earth."

"I don't want to go to Earth."

Bryn was being awkward, he'd been arguing with her since joining them near the infirmary.

Surprisingly it was Richard who told him the harsh facts of the current situation.

"We're not having you running back to Sylvie to tell her where we are." He said. "You're either suiting up or going outside without one. You won't be the first person I've killed today."

Bryn suited up, though he still muttered at her under his breath. There hadn't been a serious attempt to stop them getting to Billy for a while. Pam assumed Sylvie now had what she wanted, an entire moon base as her own personal kingdom.

"Come on..... Kelly, you open the airlock." Shouted Pam.

Bryn started to argue until Pam hit him in the stomach with the barrel of the heavy pulse rifle she was carrying. It worried her that violence had become so easy for her, but she felt betrayed by people she'd tried so hard to help. It hadn't just been Sylvie's usual crowd who'd come hunting for Richard and her, Kelly had been someone she considered a friend. The outer airlock door opened and Pam finally felt free of Mordor One. Fighting while suited up was hard work and she doubted if Sylvie would risk losing any more of her followers.

"Keep walking, a nice steady pace." Said Richard.

Billy hadn't been connected up to any umbilicals, the ones on Mordor One didn't have the right connections. He'd used up quite a bit of fuel just to stop the main cabin from freezing. He wasn't the brightest shuttle she'd ever used, but he was no fool either.

"Good job MacLaren added Sylvie to the dodgy list."

She said, while helping Richard out of his suit.

"She's tried to give Billy all sorts of contradictory orders."

"As he's still here, I'm guessing he ignored her." Said Richard.

"Yes, decided to ignore everyone until he gets a reset command from MacLaren."

Richard actually smiled, the first time in a while. She kissed him, a quick peck on the lips.

"I'll get our passengers strapped in and comfortable, while you talk to MacLaren. Tell her we've decided to go home, that'll surprise her."

"I'm sure it will, Kitty will think we're crazy."

It was risky linking a direct call through the surviving satellites, but only MacLaren could get Billy going again. Maybe Norma had enough skill, but she too was in Mordor Two. The call seemed to take an age to connect.

"Did you get the data file?" Asked Kitty MacLaren.

"What? Oh yes, from Norma. I haven't looked at it yet, we're onboard Billy and getting ready to return home to Earth."

MacLaren went quiet, as if to give herself a moment to ponder on the news.

"Why Pam, why Earth? We agreed Mordor One is habitable for years and it's relatively safe."

"We had a revolt here, there have been a few deaths. Richard and myself escaped with six students. Sylvie is now the proud owner of UniConsortium Moon Base One. Can you send Billy a reset command? He refuses to move until you do."

There was the sound of MacLaren thumping away at a keyboard. As if by magic Billy's console was showing she had full control of all his systems. The first thing she did was to burn more fuel to bring up the cabin temperature a little.

"Thanks MacLaren." Said Pam. "Will you stay at Mordor Two, or are you coming home with us?"

"Oh.... Christ Pam, will you read that data file Norma sent? There was a containment failure of some kind, Norma was infected and that stupid boy who followed her everywhere. They're dead Pam and Mordor Two is contaminated. There is nowhere to go now..... How are you for fuel?"

"Not good, but it should be enough to get home, if there is a home left to go back to?" Said Pam.

"We need to talk." Said MacLaren. "The fuel and oxygen tanks at Albion were still intact when we left there. Billy knows the route, he's done it a few times now. Read that data file before you arrive and get Richard to read it. We need to talk Pam. I'll meet you at what's left of Base Albion."

Billy had the route in memory, all she had to do was select a maximum fuel efficiency trip and hit the right button on the keyboard. At one time people had talked to their machines, but that had caused a lot of accidents and unintended consequences. AI was always improving, always getting smarter, but it was invariably voiceless, people liked it that way.

"We're meeting MacLaren at what's left of Albion."

She shouted at Richard. The one advantage of Billy being a small shuttle, you could talk to anyone onboard by shouting. He was shrugging and giving her his confused look.

"Read Norma's message, she sent you a copy."

It was all there, a complete history of what had ended up being called Project K. A few nations had either found or acquired alien remains and artefacts, though none of them had ever told the general

population. America and Britain had funded various research projects and the Russian Federation had joined in after the troubles in twenty forty five.

“Fuck..... They all knew and told no one.” She muttered.

The Chinese had found a fairly complete drone near the border with North Korea. They had talked to the west, but decided to finance their own independent research. A few major powers had done the unthinkable. They’d studied alien technology and managed to keep it quiet.

The real advances had come after Fifth West Corporation had been given Project K to manage. After a few embarrassing blunders and leaks, most of the alien bodies and technology had been moved to UniConsortium Moon Base Two.

‘Weapons were the main concern in the beginning.’ The report said. ‘It was quickly realised that a human-alien-hybrid would not only make a good soldier in the inevitable alien invasion, but also a useful tool against home grown wars and insurrection.’

Richard was there behind her, pointing at the next paragraph.

“The bastards did it, adding alien sections to our DNA.” He said. “It calmly talks about the research being abandoned after a town in Costa Rica was completely wiped out by the monsters they’d created. It was all hushed up of course.”

He had to know of course, but telling him was hard after they’d already been through so much.

“They might have abandoned the research, but MacLaren said Mordor Two has been contaminated with the deviant DNA. Norma is dead I’m afraid and her friend Leo.”

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