

Ishmael II : Pandora

Chapter 26 – Final Preparations

“They’d seen so many villages that looked fairly undamaged. Seeing the ruins of York convinced Mateo Lopez that leaving with Fifth West, would be a wise move. York appeared to be another city the aliens held a grudge against, though they’d probably never know why.”



Andy Korenberg knew his stuff, he’d designed the lunar base for the European Federation and the entire Diaspora class of space shuttles were about ninety percent his designs and ideas. Just about every online database had listed him as the father of modern spaceflight, when there had still been online databases. Despite all that and the obvious trust Francine had in him, he’d still felt a need to give her a progress report, while taking her around the assembly hangars. No use trying to choose a quiet moment, the hangars were now busy right around the clock. They had a degree of privacy, as everyone was too busy to be overly curious.

“The thing to remember is that if the aliens hadn’t arrived and we were building civilian shuttles, we’d find it impossible to get them certified as being safe to fly.” Said Andy. “Some components in the fusion drives are reverse engineered from alien parts. That should make them safer and more efficient, the AI seems to believe that to be so.”

“I know Andy, we’ve been through safety so often. Ideally the design would be changed slowly, with testing at each stage. We’d end up with a shuttle ninety nine percent safe to use, in ten years time. Sadly, the aliens aren’t going to ignore us for a decade.”

They walked past one of the largest shuttles, able to take thousands of human refugees to a new home. Tons of shining titanium alloys and the latest ceramics.

“Truly a thing of beauty.” Said Francine.

“They are Francine, they really are. The least predicted failure rates of any of our craft, even though they contain the most alien tech. I’d love to have constructed more of them, but there simply aren’t enough raw materials and components within range of the scavengers. As it is the scavenger teams have suffered high numbers of fatalities. So, we’re stuck with quite a few small shuttles, which are far less admired by the AI.”

He noticed Francine fondle the edge of the door on one of the huge shuttles. He did it himself and it wasn’t just because they were beautiful gleaming machines. You had to have a certain affection for a spacecraft designed to get you safely to a new planet.

“I know you hate percentages.” Said Francine. “Maybe it’s time to talk about failure rates ? Not that we can delay going, of course.”

“I hate percentages, they’re so cold when we’re talking about the numbers of people, who won’t reach a new home. We’ve tried everything and we’ve brought down sub-system failures and the sub-systems of those sub-systems.....”

“Just tell me Andy.....How many catastrophic failures ?”

“The AI is stubbornly sticking to one shuttle in every two hundred, though always a smaller shuttle. They have more moving parts, more sub-systems....You get the idea. Basically, going into space is a risky business.”

“Half a percent.....That’s not too bad.”

“Until you think of it as dead people, Francine.”

“So, you insisted on sharing this with me Andy. Tell me, was it to keep me informed, or to share the guilt ?”

“A little of both I think.” He said.

Everywhere was busy, but the teams installing the couches had an aura of busyness like no other teams. Andy led Francine to where six people were fitting an adult sized couch and two smaller ones, probably for children.

“Get this wrong and someone won’t wake up when the shuttle gets to the new world.” He said.

“One of the few areas where everything is checked three times, twice by fellow workers and then by a manager. It all takes time, though personally I consider triple checking as essential.”

“Indeed it is.....I hate to ask, but what is the AI saying about couch failure rates ?”

“Nothing is ever perfect, but the AI is predicting close to it. A failure rate less than one tenth of a percent. We built these right Francine, they’re just about as good as we could possibly get them.”

“There will always be human error.”

“Yes Francine, but we’re trying to keep it to a minimum.”

There had been a dreadful time when new arrivals threatened to outstrip the supply of couches, and the space to fit anymore. In a way, Ish and Dora saying they were remaining behind, was perfect timing. It meant the Filey campus wasn’t going to be gutted and rendered useless. The farm workers in particular, took that as a sign of some kind. Ishmael had an almost superhero reputation and if he was staying, they were going to stay too. Andy had given up wondering if they were crazy, members of an Ishmael cult, or people with the right idea. Not that he was at all tempted to remain behind, with billions of aliens to contend with. He wasn’t that keen on Vicky’s people either, even if they did seem fairly civilised.

“If Ishmael and Pandora hadn’t decided to remain behind.” Said Francine. “I really thought I’d have to tell some of the new arrivals there was no space for them. Entire families.....I still think he was wrong, but we haven’t had to say no to anyone.”

“Apart from those with chronic health problems.” He said.

“Oh, we’ve had that argument too often. No use in taking the sick to die on a new world. Medical care will be basic for decades, we’d be doing them no favours.”

“Maybe you’re right.” He said.

“Did you plug the numbers into the AI for Ish and Dora ?” Asked Francine. “Did you get a probability of their survival ? Dora’s survival of course, poor Ish won’t see another new year.”

Andy had and he’d also asked the AI about several other probabilities. He saw no reason to tell Francine, she’d just worry about it and computers never knew all the variables. Once it had predicted the Filey campus would be wiped out and that had been two years ago.

“I didn’t even try Francine, too many variables.....Just too many variables.”

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For Lianne Verga, life in the Priozersk Base hadn’t gone to plan. For a start it was Northern Russia, where a hot dry day could be followed by blizzards, or torrential rain. She hadn’t been able to take her Nostromo up and out of the atmosphere, due to a sudden period of bad weather. Then the Norwegian base claimed to have spotted a background carrier wave when sending data bursts to Priozersk.

“Might be nothing.” JV had said. “No point taking a risk, it might be someone monitoring transmissions. We’ll be leaving for Norway immediately.”

The Filey campus had organised a ceasefire with the aliens, though Lianne wasn't sure it would hold. Would the aliens miss an opportunity to kill her father? Probably not, so she was glad they were leaving Russia. Still determined to get her bird into space, things had become even more complicated.

"I can do it on the way to Norway." She'd told JV. "A long high curving flight that just touches the edge of space, before I land in Norway. It means Nigel coming with me though. I did promise him he'd be with me on the next flight of Nostromo."

Nigel going with her shouldn't have been contentious, it wasn't as if her father even liked Nigel. But no, JV had moaned at her, saying how he'd been looking forward to getting to know Nigel better, on the journey to Norway. Lianne had dug her heels in and Nigel was officially removed from the Ekranoplan crew and added to the crew on Nostromo. There was just the two of them of course and they'd had the Priozersk Base to themselves for two days.

"Give the ground forces time to get well clear, two days should do it." JV told her. "Before you go hurtling into space and give away the position of our base."

It made sense and having the place to themselves had been fun, the privacy had definitely made their sex lives better. Though it was amazing how quickly the novelty of being alone, became the anxiety of 'Hey, did you hear that.' Launch day arrived and the weather was good.

"Make yourself comfortable Nigel, I want to do the pre-flight checks." She said.

"Of course, this is where the engines refuse to start and we end up walking to Norway."

"Don't.....Even joke about that." She said.

Her father had taken her on walks round the outside of a vintage single engine Cessna. He'd told her how important it was, that look over the exterior of the aircraft. For a prototype that had only flown twice, Nostromo looked perfect. Lianne sat next to Nigel and closed the canopy.

"We'll be climbing at just a few degrees off vertical." She said. "Make sure you're strapped in really tight. I still have a twinge in my back from the first flight, so as tight as you can stand."

"How did you learn all this stuff?" Asked Nigel.

"Mainly.....In a Cessna 172, that really should have been in a museum. Put on your headset, or you'll never hear me above the engines."

The engines came to life and there was the steady throb, which would soon become a roar.

Someone might have found their location. There might be missiles waiting to be fired. The near vertical climb was to make them a hard target to hit.

"Here we go.....Next stop Norway." She said.

There were various thrusters and engine nozzles, which needed to move around during take-off.

Luckily most of the work was done automatically by Nostromo's systems. Not the best AI in the world, though it hadn't let her down on the previous flights. Lianne hit the throttle and just before the concrete ended at a line of trees, she pulled hard back on the stick. Nostro seemed to jump up, to well above tree top height. The main engines kicked in and they were climbing faster than some ground to air missiles. She'd got the straps right this time, her back was held firmly in place.

"Nothing fired at us." Said Nigel.

He was pointing at one of the screens, which dealt with potential enemies and their weapons. No one had tried to bring them down, as they'd hurtled into the sky.

"Good, that means our ground forces aren't likely to be ambushed." She said.

At eighty thousand feet, Lianne began the long parabolic curve that would give them a few minutes in space, before taking them to the Norway base.

"How high do we have to go?" Asked Nigel.

“Depends who you ask ?” She replied. “We’ll soon be on the needle marked in miles. I’m aiming for fifty miles high, though some say space starts at sixty miles.”

“Fifty miles, straight up....Wow.”

“Get your camera ready Nigel, we’ll get there faster than you might think.”

Lianne had seen it on recordings, but seeing it herself, in her own spacecraft.....It went beyond being simply moving and wonderful, it was truly awesome. There was a slight glare at about twenty miles high, which gave way to darkness at around forty miles. It felt strange, as though they were hurtling into a dark tunnel. She let the onboard AI manage the thrust, that would bring them back to Earth at just the right spot.

“Look at the size of that thing.” Said Nigel. “I thought they’d all landed at the start of the main invasion.”

“JV thinks some are too large to land.” She said. “Constructed in space, as vast arks. They’d be pulled apart by gravity if they attempted to land.”

“That is huge, like a small moon.” Said Nigel.

Probably one of the craft the Chinese had seen coming past Jupiter and heading towards Earth. It was probably orbiting thousands of miles out into space, maybe even keeping to a powered orbit. So tempting to go hurtling after it, to use the forward cannons on it. Even reaching it might be beyond their supplies of air and fuel, and as at for firing at it. Such a huge craft might not even notice they were being attacked. To them the Nostromo would be like a gnat, a tiny insignificant gnat.

“If we needed a reminder about why we need to leave for a new world.” She said.

“I’ll get a few pictures.”

Dark objects against the darkness of space. His eyes might be showing him something truly awesome, though the pictures might look crap. Not that she’d tell him that. The front thrusters fired to slow them down and they were there, the most dangerous part of their short flight into space. AI simulation said Nostromo should have no problem at re-entry, but it was all theoretical. There was only one way to be sure of the math and that was by doing it for real. Lianne knew the stats. If they were going to become a brief ball of flame over Northern Europe, it was going to be now.

“Oh, here we go.” Said Nigel.

“It shouldn’t be that bad, we barely left the atmosphere and we’re not travelling that fast, compared to lunar shuttles.” She said.

There were sparks and flames coming off the front of Nostromo, though not for long. The hull temperature hadn’t reached anything to be concerned about, and it was over. They were high, it looked impossibly high. Beneath them on a rare dry, bright day, was the outline of Scandinavia.

“According to the navigation system, we’re on a perfect heading for the Norway Base.” She said.

“Actually.....I wouldn’t mind doing all that again.”

Nigel had been a fling, someone to have a little adult fun with, nothing more. She’d told JV several times that Nigel was definitely not someone she was going to get serious about. Yet now, when he’d mentioned going into space again.....She saw him differently.

“I’ll be taking the plans and I do intend to build Nostromo Two on our new world. It might take a while, but if you’re not doing anything when she’s ready. Then yes, I wouldn’t mind going into space with you, around a new planet.”

“So, you might put up with me for a while ?”

“Who knows Nigel, maybe I will.”

Norway gradually became everything they could see of the planet below and eventually the wood surrounding the Fifth West Norway Base, looked like real trees, rather than toys on a painted

background. All the time the AI was aiming them at a patch on concrete, about two hundred yards for the base.

"Alright, I have practised vertical landing, so we should be fine." She said.

"Do the ejector seats work this close to the ground?"

"Mine does, though I'm not sure about yours."

It was worth it, just to see the worried look on his face. The trees were a nightmare, she had to come down vertically for the last two or three hundred feet. The thrusters complained and there was a definite creaking sound from somewhere. She did it though, the Nostromo landed without a hitch.

"Now that.....Was an experience." Said Nigel.

"Yeah, they did offer to clear the trees. Thinking about it, they do give my bird good cover while she's on the ground."

Lianne felt stiff as she climbed out of Nostromo, the extra G force during take off seemed to be doing dire things to her joints. Nigel was walking a little strange too.

"Looks like we've got a welcoming committee." He said.

She didn't recognise the two people running to greet them, though they obviously knew her.

"Lianne.....Lianne."

The woman looked to be about forty and the way she was yelling her name didn't feel right.

"Is everything alright? Did I land in the wrong place?"

"It's your father Lianne. There was an accident."

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Tyler Bates had seen the creatures, though his children had become quite friendly with some of the younger ones. Tirsa had found out they thought of themselves as the children of Vicky. Not a deity as he'd first thought, but a real person, or more accurately, a real creature like them. To Tyler they were creatures who appeared to pose no threat, so he ignored them. The occasional nod to one of the young ones who passed by, but on the whole, he ignored them.

"They've taken over the old supermarket building." Zane had mentioned. "They did a few repairs, but not that many."

"Just enough to keep the wind and rain out." Tirsa had added.

His wife, Liza, thought of the creatures as allies against the alien creatures. Someone else out there helping with the fight had to be a good thing. Tyler still wasn't sure, but they'd obviously set up home in what was left of town and he was a believer in not getting overly worried by things he couldn't change.

The cloudy sky had been dark just after dawn that morning, with a definite threat of rain. So, his kids had put on their hunting clothes and headed north. Rabbits this time, they'd both become really good at trapping rabbits for the pot.

"There's three of them out in the garden." Said Liza. "I think they're looking for the kids. Last time they waited out there for hours."

Two boys and a girl, he was getting quite good at spotting their genders, though that was about it. Tirsa claimed they had facial expressions, but he hadn't talked to any of them. As he watched the young children of Vicky, Tyler came to a decision. If they were going to be permanent neighbours, there had to be more neighbourliness.

"Can I give them the fruit cake?" He asked. "I bet they'll love your fruit cake."

"It was for tonight, but.....Alright." Said Liza. "Check it won't poison them first."

"How do I do that?"

"Ask them, they speak English."

Had everyone in the house spoken to the creatures, apart from him ? Tyler took the cake, still with the cover over the top. Freshly baked, it smelt wonderful. A tray and a knife to cut the fruit cake and he headed for the back garden. The creatures were near the long table his family used for summer meals outside. A bit cold, though the children of Vicky didn't seem that bothered by the cold.

"Hello." Called Tyler. "Are there any foods you can't eat ?"

"No, we can eat just about anything."

One of the males and although the voice was a long way from sounding human, Tyler could understand every word. He took the cover off the cake and noticed the female sniffing the air. Tyler cut four large slices from the cake and put them on the tray. The fourth slice for himself wasn't all about how much he loved Liza's fruit cake, it also showed he wasn't trying to poison them. He sat at the table and bit into the cake, sending out a shower of crumbs. That was a great thing about eating in the garden, no cleaning up afterwards.

"Please.....Sit down and eat.....Trust me, you will love my wife's fruit cake."

As they sat down near him, he noticed they had an odour. His kids had an odour, he knew he'd have one too. Tirsa and Zane had a slight aroma of clothes worn one too many times and heading out without washing properly. The creatures had much the same odour, though a little more musty than his kids. The three young children of Vicky, were obviously enjoying the cake.

"Good ?" He asked.

"Very good." Said the female.

The youngsters at his table looked strange, but once they'd relaxed a little, they stopped avoiding eye contact with him. They'd never be like him and his family, but they could share the town and work together, he was sure of it. Tirsa had warned him about their names being impossible to pronounce, his kids referred to them by nicknames like 'bad leg,' or 'pretty eyes.' Tyler thought he needed to ask though, out of politeness.

"My name is Tyler." He said. "Tyler Bates."

Two names that sounded like the males were gargling, but the noise the female made had a vague meaning. Tyler wasn't a linguist; he knew enough French to buy bread and wine and that was it. He had bought roofing materials from a company in Germany though, and some things had lodged in his mind, mainly dates on invoices.

"Acht. Mädchen im dritten Jahr.....You're the eighth female child of the third year." He said.

"Yes, how did you know that ?"

"I used to buy roofing tiles from a company in Munich."

Why they were named in German was a mystery, even to them. It broke the ice though and after they'd finished off the cake, Tyler thought the youngsters were friends. He'd even managed to translate the other names, which all indicated their gender and when they were born.

"If you're looking for Tirsa and Zane." He said. "They're trapping rabbits today, a few miles to the north."

"We know the place."

Tyler told Liza about the conversation and that was that, as far as he was concerned. He was busy, the garden area required a lot of work to supply his family with fresh vegetables for most of the year. He saw his children come home with two rabbits.

"Tell mum one of them is mine." Said Zane.

"Oh, you are such a liar." Said Tirsa.

Only she didn't say liar, it sounded more like larr. Things were changing, including the way they talked. It didn't matter of course; his family could understand one another. It was getting close to

dusk, when Liza called him in for something to eat. A few minutes later, he saw the creatures of Vicky stood by their door.

"I think they brought their parents this time." Said Liza.

"I hope the fruit cake didn't poison one of them." He said.

"Oi." Said Liza.

"It's pretty eyes." Said Zane.

Tyler held his wife's hand as they opened the door. The two adult creatures looked different to their children, their fur had more brown in it. One of them was holding a bottle of expensive whisky, which it held out towards Tyler.

"I think you'd better come inside." He said.

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Sergeant Barwood had been a career guy in the British army, in it for life. He loved to feel in control, which was why he'd taken the position with Fifth West when it had been offered. An engineer in the army became an engineer working for Jaroslav Verga. It was as if he'd just swapped one part of the armed forces for another, which was perfect. There was even a Naafi type of department in Fifth West, which provided him with everything he might need and took the money from his bank every month. Barwood had felt safe with Fifth West, a weird mixture of being looked after, yet still in personal control. He certainly wasn't feeling in control as he looked at the four bodies.

"Oh dear.....Well, at least we found enough to identify." He said.

"That is definitely JV, I worked for him for years." Said Knowles.

"Even though it's just you and I in here, I need you to be precise. Can you confirm this is the body of Jaroslav Verga?"

The closest troops to the accident had erected a tent and put the bodies in there as they'd been recovered from the sea. If it hadn't been dark, Barwood would have been able to see the wreck of the Ekranoplan from the tent door. There were still three missing bodies, which would probably never be found.

"Yes, that is the body of Jaroslav Verga." Said Knowles.

"Was he likely to have had any religious problems about being buried at night?"

"He believed in a sentient universe.....So no. You can't bury him tonight though; Lianne has a right to bury her father." Said Knowles.

"Do you want her to see him like this?" Asked Barwood. "Imagine how much worse he'll look after being in the back of a truck that's crossed most of Sweden and Norway."

"But we can't just....."

"Please Knowles, hear me out. We have a truth that is unpalatable and unacceptable. I'm just proposing that you and I agree on a few small changes, to create a more acceptable truth."

"The troops on the scene know the truth, the unpalatable version."

"Then you and I must put the fear of God into them Knowles. We will bury all the bodies we found tonight and leave here in the morning....Agreed?"

"Yes, fine." Said Knowles.

"Next, we tell everyone JV was a hero, using the Ekranoplan to defend the boats being used to cross the Gulf of Bothnia. The water was low due to an unusual tide and no one could have known about the rocks just below the water. We do not mention JV trying to get up to the speed of sound, before running into an island."

"Yes, the sad passing of a hero." Said Knowles.

"Good, glad you agree. I've not always seen eye to eye with Lianne, but we owe her this."

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They'd seen so many villages that looked fairly undamaged. Seeing the ruins of York convinced Mateo Lopez that leaving with Fifth West, would be a wise move. York appeared to be another city the aliens held a grudge against, though they'd probably never know why. The battle had been over for a long time, little remained of the city. As if trying to avoid being contaminated by the dreadful sight, Mateo had taken his family north of the city. They'd finally stopped for the night in a fairly intact house in the village of Flaxton. The next morning the ritual began, with breakfast of some kind, followed by looking at the precious map to decide on a direction of travel for the day. "Oh, that map again." Said Jill. "We need a new one, that one never seems to get us any closer to Filey."

"I know what you mean." Said Mateo. "We obviously found the map for the long, scenic route." "Alright, you two." Said Helen. "I know we're all getting tired, even Tina said she's fed up with walking for miles."

"I can hear you." Yelled Tina, from the kitchen.

They were in what had probably been the dining room of a family called the Taylor's, with the map spread out of a large oak dining table. Probably the Taylor's house, though that was just a guess by Tina, as she'd found several pictures of a Gladys Taylor, posing with assorted relatives. In an age where paper correspondence had become rare, a name on those pictures was like a message from the past. Even Mateo had found himself wondering if Gladys had survived the war.

"We're here." Said Helen, while prodding the map.

"My mind must be going." Said Mateo. "That puts us not a million miles away from Filey."

Everyone groaned and moaned about the ritual with the map, but everyone wanted to be part of it. His kids came in and looked at the map they'd all grown to detest.

"We're alright for supplies, so we can go straight there." Said Helen. "As long as we keep up the pace and the weather behaves.....We could be in Filey in two days, three at the most."

"Wow." Said Tom.

"Straight along the A64, we can look for a place to sleep tonight in.....Scampston. A village in the middle on nowhere. With luck the aliens will have thought it wasn't worth destroying."

"Two days and we're there.....Wow." Said Tina.

"Does everyone approve of today's route then?" Asked Helen.

"Yes, let's try to get there in two days." Said Mateo.

Packs of wild dogs had been seen as a potential threat after the invasion, there had even been talks about the problem in the bunker, all that time ago. In reality there seemed to be few dogs left, or feral cats for that matter. Wild or domestic, our pets tend to rely on humans for food, even if it's just by scavenging among our refuse tips. No people meant no refuse, so the cats and dogs had probably starved. It was only his theory of course, but it accounted for the lack of feral pets. Mateo had left their one surviving horse behind the house and there was a pile of dark coloured fur behind her that had once been a large dog.

"Kicked him did you Bella? Well done girl, well done."

The dog was dead, but not before biting Bella on her rear legs. Nothing deep, there was only a tiny trace of blood. Still, with them that close to Filey, he worried about anything that might upset their plans. He stroked Bella and rubbed her ears.

"Please old girl.....Survive until my family gets to Filey."

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Dora knew JV had died in an accident, though she didn't know any details. The Fifth West people in Scandinavia had taken a few risks with direct communications, though only to say that JV had died but Lianne was fine and still very much alive.

"Good news about Lianne." She said. "That matters, she will now be the head of Fifth West. I know ownership of any kind really doesn't seem to matter now, but....."

"In theory Lianne now owns every Fifth West campus and the entire fleet of shuttles." Said Ish.

"Yes.....I can't see her wanting to be just a symbolic head of JV's empire. She will get a seat at the big table once they get to a new world. This will change the government dynamic of the new world." She said.

"Though of course, it's dreadful to hear that JV died. So close to the great day." Said Ish.

"Do I sound a bit heartless ? We've had our problems with JV and let's face it, history is littered with great leaders who never quite made it to their promised land." She said.

"More Andy's promised land." Said Ish. "I seem to remember JV wanted mankind to hide in bunkers, until the aliens got bored and went home. I remember working with Lianne and she did interview me for my first job at Fifth West. I think JV's empire will be in safe hands."

"She was nice to you Ish and you have this thing. You still think all women are made of sugar and spice. We're not you know and Lianne definitely isn't."

Ish was giving her his hammy acting look of shock.

"You Biff, you're not made of all things nice ? No, it can't be. Tell me it isn't so."

She gave him a playful thump on the arm and for a moment, there no pain in his eyes. They were alone in a quiet corridor, so she kissed him.

"Idiot." She said. "Come on, if we're late the coffee will have gone. We'll be left with that camomile tea that tastes of soap."

They were due to see Andy, to discuss any timing implications of JV's death. Everyone on campus had been told the news, or had heard it from someone. They all saw so little of JV, that no one thought the news was likely to effect morale. By cutting himself off in the Russian base, JV had turned himself into someone who only existed in his news updates. Dora began to wonder if that had been a deliberate part of a long-term plan. As for timing implications.....As far as she could see there were none.

"There's your mum again." Said Ish. "She's pestering Andy now."

Andy had moved out of his backroom in the hangar and into one of the common rooms on a finished shuttle. Yes, the large shuttles had common rooms that could seat hundreds in comfort. Judy Gray wasn't being thrown out of the shuttle, not quite. Andy was shouting at her mum about something, while two guards escorted her right onto the gangway.

"She's not supposed to be here." Said Dora. "People only put up with her doing as she pleases, going where she wants, because she's my mum. It's really infuriating. Francine told me she's been trying to reorganise umpteen things that don't need to be reorganised."

"You need to tell her." Said Ish.

"I know, will you be alright if I go after her ?"

"Yes, I'll be fine. Today looks like being a good day."

From the gangway there were only so many ways her mum could go. Dora waited next to a large crate, using it to remain hidden. As her mum went by, she gave her a head start before following her. Privacy was needed, Judy Gray had to be told a simple truth, though she deserved it to be with no strangers listening. Dora had loved the idea of her mum organising the local population where they'd lived before the invasion. Organised panic buying for their elderly neighbours had been so

endearing, so very Judy. Had it been endearing though, or maybe she hadn't wanted to think about it. Panic buying was panic buying, some supermarkets had run out of tinned food, long before shortages became the new normal. She'd had medical school to worry about and then Heathrow had been bombed out of existence. Hindsight is always twenty-twenty vision, but Dora wished she'd given her mum's actions at the time, a little more thought.

"Mum.....Do you have a moment?"

Not a corridor, just a grubby part of the hangar with no footfall most days. It was a cut through to admin; her mum was probably going to have another crack at Francine.

"I am a little busy today." Said Judy.

"Are you still going on the shuttle with Rod?"

"Yes, of course I am. We've been allocated to FC-057, one of the largest shuttles."

"Good, because I don't really want you remaining here. With your attitude and the insults to Ish. You'd definitely not be welcome here."

"How dare you talk to me like that." Said Judy.

"Dare.....you bet I'll dare. I know you now, I really see you. You might well end up as mayor of New Filey, or whatever they call the first new city. Mayor Judy.....It has a ring to it. Do your worst mum, the human race can survive anything, even being organised by you. If there's a habitable planet to find, the AI will find it. There will be enough people to form a viable population for mankind's new home. Humanity has survived so much.....Do your worst, a meddling Judy won't cause much damage."

"Why? Where has this come from so suddenly?" Asked Judy.

"Not suddenly, it's been there my whole life. I got so used to it that I stopped asking myself why you were..... As you are. It's over now, I've had enough of you, more than enough. Goodbye and good riddance, I never want to see you again."

It was a long walk to the nearest set of doors, all the time waiting for the inevitable response. It never came, it was a first. The first time in any conversation with her mum, where she'd had the last word.

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The survivors from Base Albion had lived at the Norwegian base, quite a few of them for quite some time. Lianne had been given the small apartment Pamela Rath had once shared with Richard Martucci. There were even a few of their things still hanging up in wardrobes. At some point one of them had put a framed copy of Earthrise on the wall above the bed. Taken over a century before, the famous picture of planet Earth rising up from the lunar horizon. Someone from Albion had told her the Earth looked bigger if you were on the moon to watch it rise.

"I've always wanted to see it happen for real." She'd told Nigel. "Now I never will."

Nigel was with her of course, sharing what were probably the best rooms in the base, apart from those used by Andy when he was there. Things were different now her dad had died, and she was now the new boss of Fifth West. There was no room service, it was a military base on high alert. Yet when Lianne had said she couldn't face the main refectory, a smiling face had brought them a meal on a trolley. A decent meal, there was even a bottle of wine. Cake too and to Lianne, no problem ever seemed insurmountable, if there was cake.

"It's nice that they're looking after you." Nigel had said.

"Ahh, I'm an unknown to them, the new boss, at least in theory. Will I roll over and let Andy Korenberg run the show, or show my teeth a little? That is what everyone is wondering."

"I don't have to wonder.....Andy won't know what's hit him."

There had been sex, a lot of sex. It felt like reaffirming life, as if the passion shouted out that she was still alive. Plus, the feelings of passion and pleasure, threw grief out of her mind, at least for a while. She'd woken Nigel up twice, when the dark thoughts had begun to return. Few words, he seemed more than happy to join her in losing their sanities to the catharsis of prolonged sex. The sex also stopped her having to deal with the times when she hadn't thought of her father with love. He wasn't always a good person, though she'd rarely thought about that too hard. She turned to look at the clock and it was about four in the morning.

"More sex, or are we going back to sleep?" Asked Nigel.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up. Sleep now and thank you, for helping me to avoid thinking for a while."

"Happy to oblige." Said Nigel.

"Are you any good at remembering things when you wake up?"

"No, useless.

"Yeah, me too."

Still naked she got up and stumbled about in just the light from a nightlight close to the floor. There were probably a dozen ways to record a message, though in her half-asleep state, the pencil seemed the best. A stub of a pencil next to a paper jotter, quite rare things even before the invasion.

'Make sure I'm one of those woken first when we get there.' She scribbled.

It felt so nice to cuddle up to Nigel again, she'd been right to get up and write it down. By morning she might well have forgotten. It was important that she was one of the few chosen to be woken first. They were the ones who might have to make a few tough decisions, depending on what they found. She was JV's daughter and it was important that one of those voices was hers.

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