

## Ishmael II : Pandora

### Chapter 14 – Tripoli

**“Manchester had offended the aliens in some way no one understood. Right from the early days of the war, they’d thrown everything but the kitchen sink at the city.”**



Deb Newman liked to keep up to date with progress in the shuttle assembly hangars, though others might have called it being nosey. Often she brought her son with her, held across her tummy in a kind of papoose. Iris went through periods of enjoying being a babysitter and times when she didn't. It had been a day when Iris had volunteered to look after Ramsay.

“Awww.... No baby Ramsay today ?”

“Sorry Sheena, Iris wanted him today.”

Women or men, everyone seemed pleased to see her child when he was with her. She'd been teasing Andy about adding her son to the payroll as a staff morale improver. Deb loved the large hangar, where two thirds of the shuttles were ready to leave planet Earth and take them to a new home. It was the same in every major Fifth West facility, everyone frantically getting their rockets ready for the big day. In all over five hundred shuttles would leave together, like a flock of huge birds. The shuttles would only hold a relatively small number of people, though Andy was certain there'd be enough to form a sustainable population when they got there, wherever there turned out to be. Two hundred thousand was the magic number, at least according to Andy and the campus AI. All the shuttles combined would carry over a million, so all being well, mankind had a good chance of survival. Deb found what she'd wanted to see, a baby couch waiting to be installed in a shuttle.

“Looks big, but we're using the same couch for new-borns, right through to large toddlers. The bigger kids will get a full size adult couch for the trip.” Said Richard.

Richard Martucci had been the commander of the British Base Albion moon base, though like just about everyone, he was now helping with shuttle assembly. Deb had seen him around and knew he shared a campus apartment with Pam Rath. Apart from that he was just another face at the weekly update meetings.

“Are the baby couches as reliable as the adult version ?” She asked him. “Has there been much testing ?”

“It's the same technology used in all the couches Deb, just scaled down. As for safety ? All I can say is that if I had a baby, I'd be happy for them to use one of these couches.”

It didn't answer her question, but it was probably the best answer she was likely to get. She wanted her baby to be safe, so ideally there'd be years of testing. Her realistic non baby mum side of her brain realised that was impossible.

“Ramsay will be fine Deb, you have my word.” Said Andy.

Andy Korenberg was like that, he had a weird ability to creep up on you without being noticed. Deb trusted Andy; she trusted all of the shuttle team. It was just that her child would need the couch to survive for decades, maybe centuries. There was a chance Ramsay would be kept in suspended animation by the couch for several millennia. It all sounded so insane and she might have had a full blown panic attack if Andy hadn't taken her attention in another direction.

“Actually I’m glad we bumped into one another Deb.” He said. “You seem to have gained a reputation as an expert scavenger. I have urgent need of someone with those skills.”

“Don’t you have scavenger teams for jobs like that ?” She asked.

“All busy finding various metals and rare earths Deb. I suppose the clue is in the name, but rare earths are giving us all sorts of problems. This particular bit of looting will need you to work with Kitty MacLaren and I know you’re friends.”

“We’ve got drunk together Andy.....Twice I think. That’s the extent of our friendship.”

“Super.... Come with me and I’ll tell you what I need you to find.” Said Andy.

Anyone else and she’d have told them to go to hell, but it was Andy. She followed him to the section of the hangar he’d turned into a makeshift office. Her mood improved no end when he offered her coffee from his fast dwindling stash.

“The real stuff Deb, a bag of Colombian beans a scavenger team found near Preston. A bit past their use by date of course, but what isn’t.”

Real coffee settled her into a more agreeable frame of mind, which had obviously been his intention.

“Of course I can’t force you to go Deb, but we desperately need small amounts of several complex chemicals.” He said. “We could make them on campus, but the reactions can be quite energetic and quite dangerous. We know of a storage facility which has a little of everything we need.”

“Are the chemicals dangerous ?”

“No, they’re quite stable. It’s just the production process that can be dangerous.”

It was the third sip of the coffee that made her putty in his hands.

“Alright, I’ll get these chemicals for you Andy.” She said. “Where do I need to go to ?”

“You’ll need MacLaren and a few Fifth West fighters, I can make sure you get the best. It’ll be a fast in and out to the storage facility in one of the fastest helicopters we have.”

“Ok, now I’m worried Andy. Why do I need so much firepower and a stealth copter ?”

“The storage facility is in Moston, which is in Northern Manchester. We believe the warehouse with the chemicals is intact, which is amazing considering what the aliens have done to Manchester. I hope you haven’t changed your mind about going ?”

“No Andy, not all.”

Manchester had offended the aliens in some way no one understood. Right from the early days of the war, they’d thrown everything but the kitchen sink at the city. Fifth West aircraft had actually used the constant light from the fires to navigate at night. She was a new mum, it would have been very easy to back away from the mission. Why go then ? Deb had a feeling about the trip to Moston and her feelings were rarely wrong.

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They’d found the boat yard by luck and with such ease, that Matt Newman began to feel someone up there might be looking after them after all. A boat yard on the main Al Shat Road, so some unimaginative Libyan had called it Al Shat Boat Repairs. There had been some evidence of looting, someone had been through the cupboards in the office and emptied the small fridge in the kitchen area. Ela of all people had found another sign of the war, a badly decayed body in the storeroom. A body that looked as though it had been there for several years. It hadn’t been that unpleasant to wrap it in an old rug and dump it in the harbour. Once that grisly reminder of the war had been dealt with, the boat yard office had begun to feel almost cosy. There was also more space than they’d been used to for a while, constantly living on The Eleanor. It was their second morning in Tripoli and Matt was helping Doug strip down one of Eleanor’s two powerful diesel engines.

“She can run happily with one engine.” Said Doug. “Though as there are plenty of spares here and we’ve seen no recent activity by the aliens, we could strip down both engines. What do you think ?”  
“Having both engines working properly would be nice.” Said Matt. “And to be honest, it’s nice to be on dry land for a while with room to stretch my legs. I can’t see Bren minding a few extra days on terra firma. So.....Two rebuilt engines it is.”

Doug had broken one of the golden rules of course, saying there was no sign of the aliens. There wasn’t, not even a solitary small green hanging from a wall. Saying it tempted fate though and Doug should have known better. Bren came down the stairs far enough to talk to them, though not close enough to get oil on her clothes.

“Ela and I found a store that still had a few tins left.” She said. “Neither of us could read the labels, but going by the picture we have a large tin of pineapple chunks. Do you guys want some ?”

“Oh yes, I wouldn’t mind some of those.” Said Matt.

“Me too.” Said Doug. “Did you find any tea ?”

Bren began to shake a box of Earl Grey tea bags at them as though they were something very special, which of course they were.

“Earl Grey tea bags in Tripoli, who’d have thought.” Said Bren. “Ela is heating up a pan full of water for tea all round. I’ll be back with tea and pineapple chunks.”

Lifting the engine’s cylinder head was hard work and required a winch. Luckily the boat yard had the right tools and equipment, even if everything was a bit old.

“Yep, the old girl could do with a rebore really.” Said Doug. “A bit too ambitious for us though, we’ll have to settle for a good decoke and changing a few valves. Hmmmm...Maybe the piston rings while we’re at it.”

Bren returned with tea and bowls full of pineapple, which turned out to be in rings rather than chunks, though no one minded.

“Do you mind a few more days in Tripoli Bren ?” Asked Matt. “We’re thinking of working on the second engine.”

“That’ll be great, I love it here. No sign of any aliens and a chance to walk more than a few feet without having to turn around and walk back again. Ela loves it here too.....So peaceful.”

Now Bren was doing it, tempting providence or the luck fairy, or whatever punished such things. No good telling them though, they’d just say he was being paranoid.

“Looks like we’re in Tripoli a while longer.” Said Doug. “Until Sunday at least, assuming today is Thursday.”

“It’s Wednesday.” Said Bren.

“Are you sure ?”

“She’s right Doug, it’s Wednesday.....All day.” Said Matt.

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Steve Penboss still didn’t want to tell everyone, but Daisy was different. You could say things to someone you shared a bed with, things you might not be happy to tell other people. He sat on the edge of their bed, pulling on a pair of old but wearable boxer shorts.

“You know what Daisy.....I like Jersey. I’ll admit I was wrong, coming here was a good idea after all.” She made a thing about putting her hand on his forehead, as if checking to see if he was well.

“Well, no sign of a fever.” She said. “Of course you might have been taken over by the aliens.”

It was a sort of rule they had, a pact. Inappropriate humour and embarrassing admissions were fine, as long as it was in the privacy of their own bedroom. As if to underline one of the problems with sharing a house with the Lopez family, Tracy chose that moment to begin shouting at Alejandro.

'My mother warned me about you.....'

"Nothing like the old classics." Muttered Daisy.

"Do you think they can hear us screwing?" He asked.

"Bound to when you think about it...We can hear them."

Not that the thought of their noisy sexual repertoire being heard by others would put him off. He'd once had sex in a field next to the Brands Hatch circuit, on a race day. He'd even heard someone give him ten points for style. It was just another reason to put in yet another request for their own place. A one bed apartment would do, preferable somewhere closer to St Helier.

"Are you ready?" He asked. "I can't be late, the Pettigrew sisters are reading to the class this morning."

Steve had thought he'd be given the job of farm labourer, or maybe something else that required a bit of muscle, but not much thought. He didn't have much in the way of qualifications, though he had once written a book, a romantic comedy. It had been published, though it didn't sell in huge numbers. Based on that small victory in his life the Kingdom had given him the job of lecturer in creative writing at the newly opened St Helier University.

"Hang on.....I'll walk with you." Said Daisy.

At one time she'd have followed him a few minutes later, catching up somewhere near St Aubin Harbour. Things had changed though, Jersey was no longer the tranquil, idyllic place it had been. Friction between the mainly French descendants on the east of the island had flared up again and no one liked walking on their own. Steve waited by the outside door, knowing it would shave another minute off Daisy's getting ready time. When she joined him, they began their trudge of just over a mile into St Helier, where just about everyone worked for their food credits.

"Are they any good.....The Pettigrew twins I mean?" Asked Daisy.

"Yes, the youngest has a real talent for short stories with a twist at the end."

Daisy worked in the administration building on Cleveland Road, right opposite the building where King Gideon had his royal apartments. She claimed to be just a grunt who typed, but Steve thought she was asked to attend a lot of meetings for a grunt in admin. It was rare to see signs of political tension to the west of the island. It was there though, large spray painted letters on the wall of the old station café, which had closed years before.

'les britanniques sont de la merde,' (the British are shit).

A good and talented spray painter, they'd added shading in all the right places. Steve was shocked more than worried, though he'd no intention of letting Daisy go anywhere on her own until the current tension had eased. There had been three stabbings on Jersey in the last few months and the last one in a pub had been fatal. A man with an English surname had killed a man with a French surname and the merde had well and truly hit the ventilateur.

"Dreadful.....Why can't people just get on." Muttered Daisy. "If they'd just be kind to one another....All these nasty slogans."

Steve had no grudge against anyone, though poor Alejandro had been spat at one night. His name was a bit too foreign for some, his skin a little too dark. Maybe he wasn't French, but a Spanish background was close enough for some, close enough to hate.

"Things will settle down Daisy, they always do. Jersey is a small island and we all need one another. It might take a few months, Mr Arnaud was a popular man. Eventually though, things will go back to how they were."

"That wasn't good....People are always sniping at each other."

“No one ever claimed life was perfect Daisy. To be honest. I’m more worried about Lighting Up Day than the French murdering us in our sleep.”

“You really think the aliens might attack ?” Asked Daisy.

“Oh yes, I do....Light the island up like a Christmas tree and I’m sure they will.”

King Gideon was a rare thing, a populist monarch. There had been a slightly under expectations harvest, followed by a little violence after the stabbing to death of Mr Arnaud. Nothing too bad, but King Gideon had decided the people needed something to raise morale. There had been a proclamation stating that the aliens were no longer a threat. Had they left Earth ? Were they happy to leave the remnants of mankind in peace ? No mention was made of those possibilities. King Gideon merely said the aliens were no longer a threat, so blackout was ending the following weekend.

‘No longer will we hide in the dark my people. Light up your homes on Lighting Up Day.’

The King had proclaimed, so everyone was going to do it. The local and only power station was gearing up for a night of record demand. Steve had a bad feeling that Lighting Up Day might well be followed by attacks by the aliens.

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There hadn’t even been an argument with Iris about her staying on the campus to look after Ramsay.

“I’ve no wish to see the horrors those creatures have done to Manchester.”

Iris had told her and Deb could understand her feelings. She wouldn’t have been in a helicopter heading towards Moston, if Andy hadn’t told her the trip was essential. She had no idea what the chemical compounds were or did, but he’d given her a list of what labels to look for on boxes and crates.

“Don’t worry about caustic materials labels, or hazard signs Deb.” He’d told her. “All the chemicals will be inside well insulated and tough containers.”

Which had all sounded like he was protesting too much for a mission to pick up a few harmless, stable compounds. Deb might have objected, or pestered Andy for a few more details. The problem was that she enjoyed the idea of being a scavenger and was looking forward to looting the storage facility. Kitty didn’t need to use a microphone to talk to them from the front; she had one of those voices that travels well.

“We’re coming up on Moston.” Kitty yelled. “About six minutes from landing.”

Deb didn’t know any of the heavily armed men and women wearing body armour. Six of them, all supposedly the best Fifth West had. They began to check over their equipment, while Deb took the opportunity to look out of a window. Moston was to the north of Central Manchester and although there was extensive damage, she’d been told the storage facility was largely intact. No one on the campus could tell her exactly what to expect and ‘largely’ could mean anything from a little damage to half the facility being a smoking ruin.

“Jeezz.....They’re still bombing Manchester. I heard one of their top guys was killed there in the first few days of the war. It explains why they never stop punishing the city.”

She hadn’t heard the soldier come up behind her and had no idea of his name. It was quite nice though, to have someone to share a little gossip with. Her life lately had been about half Ramsay and half running the campus clinic.

“Another rumour is that there was a secret control bunker under the city for Britain’s defences.”

“Probably rubbish.....Maybe the aliens just didn’t like the look of the place.”

“You might be right.” She said.

Smoke was still rising from the centre of Manchester, for whatever reason the aliens were still punishing the city. One of the scavengers had told her the ash and dust from the constant fires coated everything for many miles around the city.

"We're landing.....The facility looks fairly intact." Yelled Kitty. "I'm putting us down in the central courtyard."

The facility stored everything from military materials to pest control chemicals for the local council. A large square building with a central courtyard, which would hopefully be easy to secure. The plan had been to land in the middle of the nearby A663 road if the courtyard was unusable. No one had fancied that idea very much. Kitty was good; Deb barely felt the helicopter land. All the Fifth West soldiers were looking at her, she'd forgotten they were there to help her and would be waiting for orders.

"Alright.....We need to find a way in to storage area F-7." She said. "Spread out and look for an entry point. Most importantly of course.....Don't let anything kill me."

One or two of them laughed, though most didn't. They spread out, doing as instructed, looking for a way in. One soldier stayed with her, the same guy who'd looked through the window with her. He looked so young to be a soldier.

"Alright, I'm Deb." She said. "What's your name?"

"Tremblay Mam."

"Don't Mam me soldier. I'm Deb and I want your first name."

"Darryl."

"Good.....Come on Darryl, I can see they've found an open door."

The troops were efficient and professional, using their flashlights once they were away from the open door and the daylight. They also began to use disruptors to finish off the small greens, which seemed to be everywhere.

"We'll stay here until they've made the area safe." Said Darryl.

There was a lot of firing, which implied there had been a lot of half dead alien Bio-Bots in the facility. Deb knew how dangerous they could be, she'd seen the eviscerated remains of a few of their victims. The electronic blasters weren't that noisy, but they had an electromagnetic signature that could be picked up and traced from miles away. It was more urgent than ever to get in and out quickly, ideally with all the compounds Andy needed. Eventually one of the soldiers waved them forward.

"We got most of them." He said. "Be very careful though and use a flashlight before entering the darker areas."

It was a large facility, Deb understood that without several dozen extra troops, there would still be a few aliens lurking in the shadows, probably quite a few. Trying to exude a confidence she didn't feel, Deb strode into the centre of the building they were in. There had to be something to the idea of luck and her personal luck looked to be having a good day. It was there on the wall in front of her, painted in yellow reflective paint with an arrow beneath it. Area F-7 it said.

"This way." She said.

There were lots of those flappy plastic doors on the way, the sort that allow fork lift trucks to move about with ease. She waited as each doorway was examined by the soldiers and twice there were small greens to deal with. No one's fault of course, the number of them couldn't have been predicted. It was just that it turned a quick in and out mission into something far slower and much more dangerous. As she walked into section F-7 of the storage facility, she knew why she'd heard several of the soldiers gasp.

"This can't be right." Said Darryl.

They were all looking at her again, though now she knew what was expected.

"We all have our orders." She shouted. "I'll identify the correct crates and then you will all help carry them to the helicopter. Wear gloves if you have them, but Andy Korenberg needs these chemicals. You must all have loved ones who want to leave Earth on the shuttles."

Had that last part sounded mildly threatening? She definitely hadn't intended it to sound that way. She had their attention though, they all looked ready to carry crates, even if they probably weren't that keen. Deb wasn't religious, though sometimes prayer fell into the it can't hurt list of things. She mumbled a quick prayer to any deity listening and walked through the broken door of the high security storage area. She'd never seen so many caution and danger signs, anywhere. One even mentioned a special biohazard level four warning. It comforted her a little that Darryl had followed her.

"Crap Deb.....Are we really going to carry this stuff?" He asked.

"We have to, or no one will be getting on a shuttle to a new home."

A barrel had gone over on its side, the green contents covered a section of the floor. In her mind Deb pictured the green liquid as oozing and bubbling, even though it was now nothing but a dried up stain on the floor. She referred to Andy's notes and easily found a large crate with the right lettering on the side.

"This is it, crate Ger-Haz-1707e, Germanium tetrachloride. Be very careful Andy has flagged this stuff up as pretty nasty."

"It all look bloody nasty." Someone muttered.

Deb felt the need to make a gesture, something to indicate they were all in it together. She used her bare hands to help get the crate off the racking, before letting two of the soldiers carry it out to the helicopter.

"Alright, we're doing it.....What's next Deb?" Asked Darryl.

"Ahhhh a harmless one according to Andy." She said. "Crate Thu-Bta-1804f Thulium(III) oxide."

"Over here, I see it." Someone yelled. "It means walking through the green gunk."

"Then we walk through the green gunk." Said Deb.

It crossed her mind that Andy had sent her deliberately because she'd see getting the crates as a challenge. The scavenger teams were good, but would they risk being contaminated by a weird green layer of gunk on the floor? Her though, Andy knew she was just about crazy enough to do it and consider it part of her destiny. It annoyed her that the bastard was right.

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In the Priozersk Fifth West Base in Russia, Lianne Verga realised that she also needed to go scavenging for a few pieces of equipment. Work on the shuttle she'd christened The Nostromo was coming along well, but she could see shortages of one kind or another beginning to appear on the horizon.

"You cleared this place out too well when it was decommissioned dad." She said. "I've used most of the standard spare parts, we're even running low on copper wire. I need to get a few more electrical supplies or she'll never take to the air."

Was her dad taking their daughter and pop venture as seriously as her, there was a certain look on his face. She'd suspected that getting the old shuttle ready for launch had been something intended to keep her busy, with no real chance of it actually happening. Lianne had invested a lot of time on the project though and was determined The Nostromo would leave the atmosphere and become a true spacecraft.

"It could be dangerous looking for parts out there." Said JV. "Give Sergeant Barwood a list of what you need and I'm sure he'll find them for you."

"I did dad, months ago when the shortages weren't a huge issue. Now they're threatening my bird from taking off."

There was that look again, the one that really annoyed her. It was obvious JV had no intention of letting Barwood send out scavenger teams. At that moment Lianne became determined to go out there herself, out into the dangers of that part of Russia.

"I'm sure Barwood does his best dear." Said JV.

"He doesn't know what to look for. I need to go myself....St Petersburg is only about thirty miles away, I'll be able to find everything there."

"Preposterous, it's closer to forty miles and you'd have to use ground vehicles." Said JV. "I can't risk a helicopter coming here and giving away our position."

"Then I'll go by road dad. I'll use my own feet to walk there if I have to. The Nostromo is going to get up out of the atmosphere and into orbit. I'm determined about that." She snapped.

"Nonsense, I won't allow you to go, it's far too dangerous."

It was the point of no return for Lianne. She either backed away and her bird would never fly, or she'd be far more rude to her father than she'd ever been before.

"What will you do, put me in chains if I try to leave? I remember you once had Ishmael chained up and we both know that just made things worse. I will be going to St Petersburg father.....I need the parts."

He might actually lock her up of course, she knew he was capable of it.

"Ishmael and Pandora were under house arrest once, but only briefly." Said JV. "I've always regretted it and as you say.....It has left a scar on my relationship with Ish."

"So I can go?" She asked.

"Yes, I can hardly lock up my own daughter though it did cross my mind. My guards are looking bored and some are getting a little...Erm podgy. A bit of a scavenging trip will do them good. We'll plan your trip, I know all the places likely to have electrical spare parts."

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Ela woke up in what felt to her like the middle of the night. Complete darkness apart from a little moonlight and there was a chill in the air. Something had woken her, she just wasn't sure what. After looking around the storeroom and finding nothing to worry about, she pulled the blanket right up and tried to go back to sleep. It wasn't going to happen, her bladder was insisting on being emptied.

"Damn." She muttered.

There was a bathroom in the boatyard, though none of them used it. Bren said it was like a service station toilet, the king of all service station toilets. Ela had never used one, but she took Bren's word for it. Even Matt and Doug did what they needed to do by finding a private spot and doing it in the ocean. It meant not only getting up, it meant walking outside, which would well and truly wake her up.

"Damn." She muttered, again.

Doug was sleeping near the door with a shotgun beside him. Bren and Matt had found their own place to sleep on the other side of the yard. Doug had been working hard on the engine and she was determined not to wake him. Like everyone else she slept in the same clothes she wore during the day. Ela very carefully crept past Doug, but stopped just outside the door. Someone was climbing over the gates, which they always closed and bolted at night. Large heavy gates a good fifteen feet



high, yet someone was clambering over the top. Ela wondered if someone rattling the gates had woken her up.

It was a young man climbing down the inside of the gates. Quite an ordinary looking young man, though the moonlight wasn't showing her his face. Ela might easily have called out to him. As Bren was fond of telling her, they were in a world where every surviving human was likely to be desperate and in need of help.

The man wasn't alone; another young man was coming over the top of the gate. There was something about the way they moved that indicated they were both male, though she couldn't have defined why. Similarly she couldn't have explained why she knew the two men now walking across the yard weren't quite right, not quite human. Ela had watched a lot of people walking about during her seventeen years of life and she knew the men didn't walk right. The creature called Vicky had warned Matt about alien creatures who looked exactly like humans.

She knelt next to Doug and put her hand over his mouth, before shoving at his shoulder a few times. As his eyes opened she whispered in his ear.

"Two aliens are in the yard." She hissed in his ear. "The ones that look like people."

Doug looked old to her, definitely older than her father. He woke up quickly though and nodded at her before using his fingers to wipe his eyes. Doug picked up his shotgun.

"Stay in here Ela." He whispered.

Doug had a serious looking shotgun he'd acquired somewhere in Asia. It even had a rotary magazine that held a staggering number of shells. Everyone had some kind of gun, apart from her. Matt had refused to let her have a gun, so she'd taken a knife off a dead girl in Sri Lanka and kept it hidden under her clothes. As Doug stepped out into the yard, she held the nasty looking knife against her chest.

Doug fired twice at the closest young man and just for a moment she wondered if she'd got it wrong. Doug might have just killed a harmless Libyan looking for help. Doug would definitely have shot the other guy if someone hadn't killed him first. A heavy barking sound as an assault rifle was fired, probably by Bren, who'd found an old Kalashnikov somewhere near Suez.

"Are there any others?" Yelled Matt.

"Not sure, be careful." Shouted Doug.

Ela stayed where she was in the doorway, clinging to her wicked looking blade. The electrical sparking from the bodies was a relief, it meant she hadn't caused the death of two humans. She ignored all the noise and sounds of the adults searching the yard, until she saw them examining the dead creatures by flashlight. Ela crept out slowly to get a look at what had come over the gates.

"Crap, it's even got a bulge in its pants." Said Doug. "The aliens are making these things too damned well."

"Vicky said they have no body odour." Said Matt.

"As if we'd ever get close enough to find out." Said Bren.

"It moved weird." Said Ela. "Not sure how I knew, but it just didn't move right."

"A few million years of humans watching other humans Ela." Said Matt. "We know how people move and we can tell if something isn't right."

"Thanks by the way, you saved our arses." Said Bren.

"Yep, she did that." Added Doug.

"Can I have a gun now?"

They all looked at her and they must have seen the knife. Matt nodded at Bren, who gave a kind of shrug in the direction of Doug.

"We do have a couple of spare shotguns." Said Doug.

"You'll need training." Said Matt.

"I don't mind."

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Inka Malovic didn't mind working outside on the farm. They were relying on those inside the campus to build the escape shuttles and the inside workers were relying in them to keep them well fed. To Inka it seemed fair and she enjoyed being outside in the open air, unless it rained. There was the Green Death of course, but they all had masks and the little yellow pills. Some days the batteries that powered her mask would run out of charge an hour before her shift ended, which left her gasping for air in the mask, or taking it off. Not that much of a risk, they were all taking the magic little pills. And as she often said to Kata.

"Life is never perfect."

She was learning yet another old skill that few remembered. Threshing, she was being taught how to thresh wheat the old fashioned way, using her muscles rather than a motorised threshing machine. Hard work, but she still didn't enjoy being interrupted. One of the Irish girls was calling out to her, though the mask made it hard to see which one. People turned up at the campus and so far, very few had been turned away. As long as there was no hint of a violent temperament or a serious drug addiction, everyone was welcome. As long as they were willing to work for their food and shelter. No one knew where the half dozen young Irish girls had come from and that was fine too. People tended to leave their past at the doors to the campus.

"Inka, we need you. Dervla is having her baby." Shouted the girl. "You helped deliver your daughter's child....We need you."

"I was just there....In the clinic."

"Please.....None of us knows what to do."

Actually Inka had helped when a woman she'd worked with had tried to work until the very last moment. Mother nature had shown her that she was the one to decide what was the last moment. Inka had watched a terrified first aider look after that woman and the girl child she'd had on the sofa in the staff rest room. Inka had watched it all and she had a pretty good idea of what do.

The poor girl was in the barn lying on a bed of straw, though someone had at least given her a coat to lie on. Not that they'd probably want the coat back afterwards. Birth was a miracle of nature and it was also pretty messy.

"Inka is here.... She'll know what to do." Someone said.

At least a dozen people were in the barn, all looking a bit dazed and confused. At least someone had made Dervla comfortable, though the poor girl deserved a little privacy for the big event.

"Alright.....Any man here who isn't the father needs to leave. If you're a woman who's just here to gawp....You can go too." She shouted.

"The father's at the top of eight acre field, we sent someone to get him." Someone said.

There were no telephones now, or PopNet. The only way to get help was to send someone and the main campus building was a very long way to walk. Inka knelt next to Dervla and lifted her skirt.

Good, she'd had the sense to remove her knickers. It seemed as though the father wouldn't be there for the birth though, the baby's head was just beginning to show.

"Won't be long now Dervla." She said.

"I want Pdraig to be here."

"Someone has gone for him, but I doubt if your baby will wait."

The crowd had gone down to four women, which was just about manageable. Inka wasn't worried; she knew that unless something went wrong, young Dervla was about to do all the hard work. The girl looked so young, barely seventeen. Some thought patterns of childbirth were changing back to how they had been before modern technology had arrived and the contraceptive pill. Inka tended to think people just didn't have anything much else to do during the evenings. Dervla began to make the right sorts of sounds to indicate the baby was about to arrive. Lots of screams of pain and quite a lot of curses about the child's absent father.

"Here comes your baby." Said Inka.

The baby when it arrived was wet, bloody and definitely male. Inka was lost in the moment with the wonder of holding a brand new life in her hands. The child squalling brought her back from her reverie.

"It's a boy." She said.

There were the usual cheers and congratulation, before Inka placed the boy on his mother's tummy.

"Aren't you supposed to hold him up and spank him?" Someone asked.

"No, we're not barbarians." Said Inka. "The baby is fine....I need a clean blade though."

"For the cord, of course....We have a medical kit."

The tin was grubby, her hands were grubby. They were in a barn, so of course everything was grubby. The scalpel though, that was still in its original protective wrapper. Inka cut a good way from the baby and tied a knot in the cord, the clinic could tidy it up later. The mother's end of the cord would tidy itself up when she started to drain. Dervla grabbed her hand.

"Thank you Inka, thank you."

The odd thing was that although nature had done most of it, Inka still felt very proud of her part in the birth. Of course there was another thing to organise that was likely to involve at least a dozen people and tons of drama.

"We need to arrange transport for mother and son to the clinic." She said.

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