

## Ishmael II : Pandora

### Chapter 20 – Iris Bouvard

**“He’d noticed from their early battles with the Kingdom, that nothing beats being shot at to strip the humanity and good feelings out of someone.”**



Deb Newman had begun to look forward to her days at the campus clinic. The work at the Delta Labs was important, but there was something about a waiting room full of expectant mothers, or mums with tiny new babies. A few new dads too, though mainly mums. All those smiling faces, even if they did know a peaceful night’s sleep was now a thing of the past. Some women would have to leave the planet during their pregnancy, there was no way to avoid it. Deb was involved in the work to understand if that might cause complications, though currently, things were looking good.

“You’re my last for today, Kata.” Said Deb. “I’m hoping Iris has a meal ready when I get home.....So, how is Mia...She’s definitely grown since her last check up.”

“Fine, she’s a bundle of energy.” Said Kata.

“Good.”

Mia was measured and weighed, to make sure she was growing and thriving. Like most new mums, Kata wasn’t on an ideal diet, no one was. Despite that, just about all the new born infants were doing well and the tiny number with problems, were responding to treatment.

“Everything looks fine, though come and see me if you’ve any worries.”

Another good thing about clinic duty, was the end of her day requiring just a quick hand wash and hanging up her scrubs in a locker. Leaving the Delta Labs often felt like more work, with the need to get out of the biohazard clothing and go through several decontamination procedures. Deb was tired, but happy as she arrived at the apartment she shared with Iris, and her son.

“I’m home.....has he been good ?” She yelled.

No answer, which meant Iris was either busy in the kitchen, or taking a nap. A quicky look in the lounge showed Deb she’d need to cook the evening meal; Iris was fast asleep in her favourite armchair. She went into the bedroom she now shared with her son, Ramsay. He too was asleep, though she couldn’t resist tickling his tummy. His eyes opened and he smiled at her, a definite genuine smile.

“How was your day ?” Asked Deb.

One day he’d be able to tell her, it was just a matter of time. Hopefully he’d arrive home to tell her about his day on a new world, a new home for mankind. For now, he just chuckled and made a happy gurgling sound.

“I’d better wake up your babysitter.”

Iris looked so comfortable; it seemed a shame to wake her. Deb turned on a table lamp as dusk would soon become full darkness. By the time she’d banged about with the curtains, she’d expected Iris to at least be waking up. Grumpy and moaning about the noise, but she’d never slept that solidly before.

“Are you alright Iris ? Come on, give me a hand in the kitchen.”

Nothing and now there was more light, Deb was pretty sure why her friend and surrogate grandmother was so quiet.

“Oh, crap Iris.....”

The skin on her face was pale, very pale. Deb knelt next to Iris and went through the motions, merely to tick off boxes in her mind. Iris had died in her sleep, her body wasn't cold, but it was well below normal body temperature. No pulse, no breath, no reaction as Deb kissed her on the cheek.

“Fuck.” She muttered.

Deb cried for a while, her cheek resting against the face of the dead old lady she'd shared so many adventures with. The fur coat they'd looted from a Russian cruise ship was flung over the sofa; Iris used it like a blanket while watching late night movies. Going during a nap wasn't a bad way to go and Iris had reached a good age, especially considering the alien invasion. Deb had always wanted a warning when her time came, even if only a fraction of a second before the drunk driver hit her, or the thug fired the gun, or the small green leapt off the wall, to cut her to pieces.

“I will miss you.....So much.”

She checked the small kitchen and found the bottle she'd hoped was there. Her baby had been given his last feed. Deb checked on him again, mainly to give herself a little thinking time. Despite Áslaug Kárason being a qualified doctor, an experienced pathologist; people tended to call Deb when someone died on campus. Deb entered the details on the campus computer and the family of the deceased arranged whatever funeral arrangements suited them. Easy really, it often felt far too easy to send someone on their final journey. No death certificate, just an entry on the system to say someone had died. Deb was professional enough to know that someone else was needed in the loop, she was too close to Iris. She called Áslaug on the internal phone system, the call being answered after the second ring.

“Hello, this is Áslaug.”

“This is Deb, Deb Newman. Sorry to bother you with this, but...I need your help.”

Deb was crying again; she could feel the wetness on her cheeks.

“What is it Deb, what's happened?”

“Iris passed away while sleeping. I found her when I got home.”

“I'm on my way.”

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Mateo Lopez could just about keep the borrowed horse going in the right direction, though it was infinitely preferable to walking. Helen turned out to be an expert rider of course. He was getting used to being married to a cross between MacGyver and Annie Oakley. The horses had been borrowed from a neighbour, in exchange for a piglet. The kids had cried, they fell in love with all the animals. Jill had been left to look after the kids. They liked her and Tina even seemed to listen to Jill, sometimes. They'd arrive home to find several minor disasters had occurred in their absence and lots of drama, but Combe Martin was worth investigating.

“When the aliens attack somewhere, they don't mess about.” He said.

The caravan park was gone, nothing but a few lines of paving to mark where it had been. There were one or two piles of debris from the larger mobile homes, though mostly the caravans had burned away to nothing but ashes. Jill had mentioned the site office and a couple of shops, but the aliens had just left a pile of blackened bricks where they'd once been. After a couple of harsh winters and after the weeds began to take root, the caravan holiday park would be gone, wiped out of existence.

“All that way, for.....This.” Said Helen. “Jill mentioned a stores and admin building further along the coast.”

“Worth trying and there might still be shelter for the night.”

They did ride down to get a closer look at the debris, though there was nothing left to investigate. If there was a basement of some kind under the site office, there was no way of getting to it. The aliens had obviously decided the Kingdom of Devon and Cornwall had become too much of an annoyance to ignore. Their obliteration of the harmless holiday park, had been merciless.

They were tired and their horses were tired, by the time they reached the Kingdom's Combe Martin storage facility. There were the barely recognisable remains of a few people inside the walled compound, which he chose to consider good news.

"The bodies have been nibbled by animals." He said. "No incineration though, this place wasn't blotted off the landscape like the caravan site."

The twisted iron gates had been knocked to one side and there had been some bombing. There was a vast crater a little to the north, probably from a near miss. The two-storey building in the centre of the compound had been attacked and much of it showed signs of intense burning. It was still standing though.

"I don't think we're alone here." Said Helen.

"Yeah, I noticed the cart. Maybe we should announce ourselves ? It might save a few.....Misunderstandings."

Helen nodded at him, so he did his best to shout in a friendly, non-threatening way, which was far harder than he'd expected.

"Hello ! We're not going to hurt anyone." He yelled. "We just want a place to spend the night."

"Fuck off."

The replying voice obviously wasn't worried about sounding threatening. The cart was their only guess at numbers, it would need at least two people to push it around, maybe three. On the plus side it still seemed to be full of someone's belongings, which definitely gave them something to bargain with, if it came to that.

"We've got our own food." Shouted Helen. "We won't bother you."

The second fuck off came in the form of a bullet. Not a warning shout, Mateo heard the shot go past his ear. He was tired, fed up and a little angry, though the gunshot woke him up. Helen was pulling her horse around and nodding at the compound gates. It didn't need a huge amount of thought to understand what she meant. There was another shot that went wide, or at least he assumed it had, as both if they were still alive. The third shot hit Helen's horse, when they were actually through the open gates, which made him very angry.

Mateo managed a leap from his horse and helped his wife get behind the wall. His horse was quite tame and very domesticated, it came and stood next to them.

"Are you alright ?" He asked.

"Fine, just a bit winded. That poor creature...."

Helen's horse was writhing about on the ground, obviously in great pain. Mateo had a shotgun in a pack on his horse, though the rifle over his shoulder was probably better suited for the job. A large calibre hunting rifle, though he'd never claimed to hit what he aimed at. Luck was with him though, the horse stopped writhing about after his first shot.

"Bastards." He muttered.

He'd noticed from their early battles with the Kingdom, that nothing beats being shot at to strip the humanity and good feelings out of someone. He wanted to make whoever had shot at them pay for killing their horse, he wanted some payback. When Helen muttered at him, he had no problem in agreeing to her plan, none at all.

"We're going to burn their cart." She muttered. "That'll get them to come out."

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Lianne Verga hadn't been in the Ekranoplan when it had been flown, she'd remained in the APC. The Vuoski River wasn't that far from the Priozersk Base, though the pilot had told them the flight there hadn't been easy.

"Getting to the river was the hardest part, the aircraft wasn't designed to fly over marshes and wetlands." He'd told her. "I did find out one thing, you do get lift over dry land, but not much. Good job she's armour plated.....I think you might find the top of a tree or two wedged somewhere." He'd volunteered to fly the experimental craft all on his own and he'd done a good job of it, even bringing the huge craft close to a jetty quite close to a group of wood cabins usually used by tourists, in the pre-invasion days. The fact that he was calling the craft a she showed that deep down, if asked, he'd have said the Ekranoplan flew well. His constant grin had faltered a little after being told it was unlikely the ejector seat was functioning properly.

"I don't mind admitting, when you told me you'd swapped one of our best trucks for a prototype aircraft.....I wasn't happy." Said JV.

She was stood next to her father, looking at the huge beast of an aircraft. It looked so damned impressive, even if it wasn't immediately apparent what it did. Lianne had decided it was the missile tubes, no one could be unimpressed by that much potential lethality.

"So, you don't think it was a bad deal?" She asked.

"The recordings of radio traffic in Asia is immensely valuable Lianne, and now that I've seen this....Monster of an aircraft. Do you know that when the laser was invented, it was called a solution looking for a problem?"

"I seem to remember you mentioning that a few times." She said.

"Hmmmmm I'll ignore the sarcasm....Well, I believe you've found us a solution for a problem we're not even aware of. Do the weapons work?"

"Yes, though the missiles are missing. The other armaments are supposed to work."

"Supposed to.....I'll get them tested. You did well Lianne, very well. I think the Ekranoplan is easily worth one truck. I'll get the soldiers to built a hut of some kind over it and the jetty, there are plenty of trees close by. Then you will have your Nostromo project and I will have....My solution looking for a problem."

"I'm glad you're pleased, I thought you would be." She said. "I have been wanting to talk to you about Nigel, Nigel Eastwood."

"Yes, Barwood did mention your....Fling. He told me with far too much detail. I'm assuming you're now wanting to carry on seeing him?"

"Yes father."

"Alright, you have my very wary and troubled blessing, I suppose. Just don't come back next month and tell me you want to marry him."

"Oh, I really can't see that happening."

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Daisy Lorhan had found the hut, though she had no idea why it was there, or what it contained. It was a shelter from a terrible storm on a dark night and that had been enough for her to know. The clasp had no padlock, as if fate had decided they'd already had enough problems for one night. The shed wasn't large and half of it was full of what felt like tins of paint and wooden posts. There was just about enough space though, even when the others turned up.

"Keep out of the rain, I'll look for the others." She said.

Tracy and her daughter Maria didn't need much encouragement to stay in the dry, though Maria did ask her to find Billy.

"I promised to look after him." Said the toddler.

"I'll find him."

A silly thing to say, Billy might well already be beyond her help. The wind hit Daisy as she left the hut, the storm still seemed to be gaining in strength. The flashes of lightning were welcome though, they were the only light to guide her. After one flash she thought she saw someone to her right, someone still struggling up the beach.

"Hello.....Hello, it's Daisy." She yelled.

"Here.....Over here."

She found Jada, clinging onto Billy. It was tempting to keep going and look for Steve and Alejandro, but Jada seemed about ready to collapse on the spot.

"We got split up, Alejandro was hurt.....Steve is with him." Said Jada.

"There's a hut.....I'll take you there."

Daisy had to get between them and support Jada and the young boy. It seemed to take ages to get to the hut, but at least there were people waiting there to greet them. Daisy left Maria to fuss over Billy and her grandmother, while she headed back out into the storm. Her waterproofs were good quality, but they now seemed to be finding it impossible to keep the rain out. Daisy was sodden and wondering if she'd walked too far, when she saw someone barely out of the waves, a person dragging something.

"Oh, crap !" She muttered.

Was in wrong to find Steve still on his feet, while he dragged an unconscious Alejandro and be pleased about it ? She'd grown to like the Lopez family, but Steve was different, she'd known him for years. Their relationship had been a bit on and off, though the fact that it had lasted for years, had to prove something. If she'd ever really loved anyone, it had to be Steve Penboss.

"He hit his head leaving the boat." Steve yelled, against the noise of the storm.

"Is he alive ?" She asked.

"Not sure, no time to check."

"There's a hut.....The others are safe."

"Good."

Dragging a large wet guy through wet sand was a nightmare, even with two of them holding onto his arms. They were putting so much effort into pulling someone who might be.....Daisy stopped and grabbed Steve's arm.

"I'm not dragging a dead man into the hut." She yelled.

He understood, he nodded at her.

She knelt and put her fingers on Alejandro's neck, feeling a slow but steady pulse. There was a cut on his forehead, which was illuminated by a lightning flash. When she touched the dry blood Alejandro opened his eyes for a second or two, before giving a slight moan.

"I heard that, he's alive." Said Steve.

"He's lost a lot of blood."

They dragged him to the hut, where eager hands helped them drag him inside. The hut was small and damp, but it felt like a little piece of heaven compared to outside.

"Will the boat still be there in the morning ?" Asked Jada. "I have none of my things."

"None of us have anything, just the clothes on our backs." Muttered Tracy. "I don't know why you came ashore here Steve; it was madness."

Daisy had guessed the recriminations would arrive, though they'd arrived sooner than expected. She knew Steve had done his best, none of them were expert sailors. Defending him would just sound like a list of excuses, and he might not appreciate it.

"Just be glad we're all alive." She said. "As for the boat.....It wasn't there when I went back to look for Steve and Alejandro."

"Shit." Said Jada.

"Oh, grandma." Said Maria.

That at least got them all laughing, even if it was in the dark. Alejandro woke up just in time to ask a question she'd be wondering about.

"Where the hell are we?" He asked.

"I can help with that, close your eyes for a second." Said Daisy.

Daisy rarely smoked, the plastic lighter in her pocket was never used, just something for her to play with. Ex-smokers have a lot of tricks to avoid smoking and she'd found that fondling the lighter worked for her. It might not work of course.....It ignited first try, illuminating the inside of a grubby hut, full of grubby people. They really did look like a gang of desperate and wretched characters. The answer to the question was neatly stamped on a tin of green paint.

"We're in a hut belonging to Weymouth Town Council." She said.

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Helen Lopez couldn't decide what had made her so angry, the death of a borrowed horse, or probably having to walk home to Big Town. Every time she looked around the wall, someone took a shot at her, someone with a lousy aim. The lousy aim made her idea possible.

"We make a run for the cart." She said. "Once behind it, we're reasonably safe. Running for cover after we set it alight.....Not so safe."

"So, we're assuming they'll come running out to save their stuff?"

Mateo had a way of telling her an idea wasn't to his liking, without actually saying it. He had his head slightly leaning to the left, which after years of married life, spoke volumes. He didn't like the plan, but to be honest, neither did she.

"We'd try to save our stuff, wouldn't we?" She asked.

"So, let me get this straight.....When they come out, we intend to kill them all?"

"Yes, all of them, every single one. Do you have a problem with that?"

Her husband was looking from the dead horse to the cart and then the building where the people with guns were waiting, hiding.

"No, no problem at all." He said.

"Good."

Helen went first, running a zig-zag towards the cart, with Mateo following. Whoever was firing at them was really bad at it, they fired at least six times without coming close to hitting them. She flung herself to the ground, leaving space for Mateo beside her.

"They must have something decent in the cart." Said Mateo. "Here they come."

No need to set fire to their stuff, the door opened and someone came running out. Armed with a machete, it could have been a man or a woman. Long hair and ragged clothes, they looked like one of the feral humans the Kingdom's people had told them about. Helen fired her shotgun and saw the spurt of blood that meant she'd hit the target. Still, he or she came on, waving the machete and screaming like a wild animal. Mateo had to fire twice, two large calibre rounds, before the feral creature fell to the ground.

"Damn, they're tough to kill." Mateo muttered.

“Here comes another. This one has a rifle.”

She'd heard the wild humans were mindless brutes, but one had remembered how to use a rifle. It didn't really aim, so much as point the weapon in their general direction. It was probably just pure luck that it had hit her horse. Still no idea if it was male or female, the filthy hair and rags hid any tell-tale signs of gender. No messing about with someone armed with a rifle, Mateo fired at the same time as her. The feral creature that had once been human, fell to the ground and never got up again.

“I never heard of one carrying a gun.” Said Mateo.

“No, neither have I, they're either learning, or remembering old skills.”

They waited for a while and the third wild human nearly caught them unawares. Armed with a large kitchen knife, it must have come from an entrance at the back of the building. It came for her and might have stuck the knife into her, if Mateo hadn't put two rounds into its chest.

“Crap.....If these things ever turn up at our farm.....” Said Mateo.

“Makes moving seem a good idea.” She said.

They were alert for more of the feral creatures and going through the cart seemed a good way to pass the time. It seemed the three dead feral humans had given their lives to protect piles of filthy clothing and four large tins of soup. After nearly half an hour with no further signs of life in the building, they cautiously went inside. The stench of death and decay hit them straight away.

“Well, do we start from the top floor or the basement ?” Asked Mateo.

“The basement, let's get it over and done with.”

They had two flashlights with spare batteries, it had always been assumed they'd have to delve into dark places. Once down the stairs, the bodies were their main obstacle. Most from when the aliens had attacked, though not all of them. There had been a fight between the feral creatures and another group and it looked like the ferals had won. Helen did her best to avoid looking at the obvious signs of the dead being chewed at and eaten.

“Looks like the wild humans have turned to cannibalism.” Said Mateo. “I guess it was only a matter of time.”

“We'll go clockwise, checking every room.” She said. “To make sure we don't miss anything.”

Bodies everywhere, as if the basement had been their final refuge. At one junction between two corridors, they had to push the dead to one side with their feet. All the time, the stench of death became worse, as they moved away from the stairs. They found the door marked 'Base Commander' almost by accident, after assuming it was just another cupboard. There was a body wearing a smart navy-blue uniform lying over a desk, with 'Commander Archer' on the front of his jacket.

“Poor sod, it looks like they had their last stand down here.” Said Mateo.

There were two locked filing cabinets behind the desk, and as luck would have it, the keys were in Commander Archer's pocket. Mateo dug them out for her, he knew she wasn't keen on handling the dead. The cabinet was full of files, just about all of them with a 'Secret' warning, or 'Classified' on the cover.

“I know there are a lot, but we should take them all with us.” She said.

“We have the feral people's cart and we are walking home.” Said Mateo. “There are also the other floors to explore for potential goodies.”

“Really ?” She asked.

“Yes, come on, you were the one wanting to be thorough.”

“Fine.”

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Vicky had gone down into the tunnels with her fighters, despite them being against the idea. She was tougher than all of them.

"I survived on the airless lunar landscape for months." She'd told them.

Her children's children made more of a fuss than her seven first born children. It seemed that every generation thought her more and more as a figurehead, a monarch who needed to be cossetted away from the dangers of the world. Vicky saw the tunnels under Paris as the perfect opportunity to prove she could still kick arse when it was required.

"No killing the alien commanders." She yelled. "Anyone killing a senior alien commander will answer to me."

"It's difficult.....In the heat of battle, there can be mistakes." Said Vier, her fourth born child.

"There had better not be a fucking mistake." Yelled Vicky.

She never used bad language, or at least she rarely yelled expletives at her kids. It did work though, as long as used in moderation. Vier yelled at her team leaders, who would yell at their group leaders.....etc. Until the news reached those at the front of the battle. No killing alien commanders, or else you'll be dealt with by Vicky. No one wanted to face an angry Vicky.

"Heavy fighting at the next set of doors." Said Drei. "We should remain here until it's cleared."

"No." Said Vicky.

She was Vicky, mother, she whose word was law. She led and the others followed. They chuntered of course, muttering in their language which was mostly English mixed with.....She still didn't have a word for it.

"Chunter all you like Drei, just follow me." She said.

"My apologies, I meant no disrespect Vicky."

"I know."

Her warriors had been ambushed at the junction of two tunnels, it happened if you were moving fast and worrying about such things later. For the first time in quite some time, Vicky came face to face with a Bio-Bot, one of the most brutal, a large green. Lizard like, as if someone had created a scaled down tyrannosaur and given it sensible front legs. It was an armoured killing machine, with tough skin, sharp teeth and very sharp claws.

"No, leave it.....This one is mine." Yelled Vicky.

The alien's constructed monster tried to bite her; it even got its jaws around her shoulder. Vicky didn't panic, or even worry, she knew how tough her hide was. She'd survived the destruction of Mordor two, months of walking on the lunar surface, followed by the final destruction of the Chinese moon base. Her guards gasped as she gripped the Bio-Bot's jaws and pulled them apart. She didn't just break the jaws, she wrenched them away, tearing the flesh off its head. Vicky then stamped on the large green until it stopped moving. Oh, how she had needed the catharsis of facing an enemy and defeating them with her own hands, her own claws.

"Come on.....Follow me." She yelled.

The deepest tunnels she took at a run, only slowing down when the odour of aliens was at its strongest. They were there, she knew it, if only she could find the door. Vicky believed in caution, usually. She believed in knowing the full picture before acting, usually. The stench of aliens was driving her crazy, so close and yet still hidden from her. She pointed at a section of wall that looked just like any other section of wall.

"Knock it down." She ordered.



Luckily the tunnellers and diggers were still with her, their sledge hammers soon created a hole in the wall. That part of the wall was yet another false wall, hiding what had once been a doorway. Vicky had no idea how she'd known that, perhaps the human called Ishmael had put it in her head. "Let your personal guards go first." Said Drei.

"Don't be ridiculous."

The large central control room was actually quite disappointing. Her forward scouts had arrived first it seemed, though only by a few minutes. By searching a few side tunnels, they must have found the main set of doors. That was mildly disappointing, she badly wanted to be first into the alien nerve centre for Western Europe. Mainly though, she was disappointed by the lack of resistance. A handful of the creatures who looked like humans, who had been easily dealt with by her advance scouts. Vicky stepped over the dead bodies, furious that she'd had no more chances for personal combat. One of her scouts cautiously approached her.

"Only one of the aliens died." He said. "I'm sorry Vicky, he was killed when we used explosives to open the doors."

"Accidents will happen, you did well. Have you counted them yet, the aliens...How many are there?"

"Not precisely, there looks to be three rooms, each holding about a hundred of them."

"Thank you...Go back to your duties."

Three hundred of them, it was amazing. So far in all the battles they'd fought, right across the globe, they'd probably only found fifty aliens. Always deep under the ground and always connected to the spheres, which meant they weren't that mobile.

"Did you hear that Drei? Three hundred of their leaders, their elite." She said.

"Yes Vicky. What do you plan to do with them?"

"Most will die, but I made a promise, which I intend to keep. I need more light in here, arrange it."

"Yes Vicky."

The aliens were agitated, it would have been strange if they hadn't been. They'd probably called to be rescued, though Vicky's forces on the surface were more than capable of dealing with just about anything. They alien commanders were in groups of six, all connected to their spheres and various other pieces of apparatus.

"They're probably still linked to their forces Vicky." Said Drei.

"I know.....I know.....Leave them alone, for now."

She wandered through the rows of aliens, none of them armed or offering any resistance. How arrogant they'd been, assuming they were so safe that only a few guards were needed. There they were, the alien elite, all of them at her mercy. She noticed that they wobbled about on their hundred of tiny feet when she was close. Her presence obviously terrified them.

"Are any of them wearing blue clothing?" She yelled, at no one in particular.

"There is a side room." Said one of the scouts. "Not clothing, some of their skin is blue."

"Show me where."

There were four of them, identical to all the others, apart from a blueish tinge to their skin. Low down on their bodies, close to their feet. Blue though, even if it wasn't easy to see. Probably something inbred among their elite of the elite, the alien aristocracy. Vicky actually crouched right down to get a good look at the areas of blue skin.

"This must be what he meant." She muttered.

"May I ask who?" Asked Drei.

"Ishmael and you will soon meet him. Warn our surface troops that humans will soon arrive by helicopter. They are friendly.....I will not tolerate any accidents."

"I understand Vicky."

"As for these four.....We need them on the surface and we've moved aliens before. Support their spheres, disconnect them from their equipment and.....Very carefully bring them to the Square Sarah Bernhardt. There can be no mistakes, all four must survive."

"Yes Vicky, but being on the surface....."

"Don't worry, no alien bombs will fall anywhere near these four. You're in the presence of what are probably members of their royalty." She said.

"And the other aliens?"

"Kill them all and destroy everything down here."

"Yes Vicky."

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Ishmael McGrath had hugged Deb and he'd hugged a few other grieving people. As he wasn't a natural hugger, he wanted to get on the helicopter and leave all the hugging of strangers to others.

"Obviously we're sad you can't come with us, but we understand." Said Biff.

Deb was remaining behind; it was hardly surprising. Iris had been like part of her family. Actually, in the new order of things since the invasion, family often had little to do with anything genetic. No one had suggested an autopsy, so with luck, Iris would be buried quickly, with minimum fuss.

"I'm so sorry, I feel like I'm letting you both down." Said Deb.

Ishmael surprised himself, by taking over hugging duty from Biff. He really did like Deb and he rarely took to people he hadn't known for years. There was that connection between them that he didn't understand, yet it linked them more than if she'd been his sister.

"We can have a.....Something for Iris when we get back." He said. "A service maybe, a secular service of some kind maybe, if there is such a thing."

"Yes, Iris would have liked that.....I'm burying her in that ludicrous fur coat. I'm sure it's what she'd have wanted."

Iris had griped and grumped at just about everyone, yet they were all going to miss her. Like that grumpy aunt who never seemed happy with anything, but everyone loved.

"Sorry.....We really need to leave now." Said Kitty MacLaren.

The helicopter capable of supersonic flight was right in front of Hangar One, a ridiculous risk. The potential gains in Paris though.....They were huge. Kitty had told them every minute on the ground double the risk of alien satellites spotting them and the bombs beginning to fall. Ish gave Deb one last hug and climbed inside the copter.

"We shouldn't be there long." Shouted Biff. "Carry on helping Áslaug with the testing."

"I will, stay safe." Yelled Deb.

A Fifth West soldier closed the doors, there were a few of them going with them. Francine hadn't asked that many questions before authorising the trip, she was beginning to trust his instincts, and his weird gift. Biff was crying so he hugged her, which was never a chore. Hugging those he didn't know well was draining, but hugging Biff....He felt recharged. Turning in the seat though, that made him wince.

"How bad is your hip?" Asked Biff.

"The worst it's been for a while...Silly to travel, but I have to go."

"Alright everyone strapped in nice and tight." Shouted MacLaren. "I mean really tight; this bird isn't like a Scavenger Copter. When it accelerates.....You'll see."

Kitty rarely needed to use internal comms; her voice could probably penetrate titanium plate. Ish checked Biff was strapped in tight, then she checked him. The soldiers looked calm, even though

they knew Paris would be a hot zone, still being actively fought over by the aliens and Vicky's people, her children.

"Any news on Sarah Bernhardt Square?" Shouted Kitty. "Is the area secure?"

"Assume it won't be." Yelled Ish.

He had to yell it twice, his voice didn't carry as well as Kitty's, no one's did. Kitty took the helicopter up to about a thousand feet, before really hitting the throttle. The copter could really accelerate, Ish was sure his kidneys were in danger of being pureed against his spine.

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