

Ishmael II : Pandora

Chapter 21 – Alien Royalty

“Art was with her, standing there next to her, Ramsay between them in a carry cot. Their union, the one that had brought about a son would never be formerly recognised, but Deb had decided it was no longer going to be a guilty secret.”



The cart they'd won by conquest was heavy, though neither of them moaned about it. There had been a lot of things worth looting in the Combe Martin base of the now defunct Kingdom of Devon and Cornwall. Tinned food was always a good find, especially tinned meats, even if they were well past the date mentioned on the tins. A large tin of ham was already marked as a special Christmas treat. Mateo had found a few handguns in a metal cabinet, though Helen had found the two fairly new assault rifles. Then there had been a whole chest full of ammunition. It worried Mateo that both of them had been so thrilled to find weapons, but that was the way the world was now. Things were as they were, the only thing that mattered was survival.

“I seem to be doing all the pushing again.” Said Mateo.

“Don't you dare say that, look.....Look at the blisters on my hands.”

The fact that Helen could show him her blisters, proved she wasn't helping to push the cart. Not that he'd tell her that, their bickering rarely became that serious. A little picking at each other cured the boredom for a while and was cathartic after several hours pushing a heavy cart over crappy roads and tracks.

“I can see a house that still has its roof.” Said Helen.

Mateo had a watch, but it was back at the farm, though it was useless anyway. No matter how faithfully he'd wound it up, the damn thing never gave a time that seemed remotely correct. He looked at the clouds, he'd become quite good at judging time by the brightness of clouds.

“A bit early to make camp for the night.” He said. “It must only be mid-afternoon.”

“Last night we carried on until dusk and ended up in somewhere cold and draughty. Besides, we're allowed to finish early if we want to.”

“A long rest would be nice....Come on, let's check the place out.”

Houses weren't a rare find, though intact ones with an entire roof with no holes, were. No front door, that was lying in the overgrown garden. A solid roof was the key thing though, and solid walls were always nice too. The usual tactic wasn't to be covert in any way. They made a lot of noise going through the two-storey dwelling, and when nothing came out to attack them.....It became their home for the night. Then and only then, did they drag the cart up the steps and into the front room.

“Home sweet home.” Muttered Helen. “There's even a bed upstairs that looks dry and useable.”

Their meal was cold food, straight out of tins. There was a fireplace in the lounge, but neither of them fancied the risk of lighting a fire. Maybe before they'd seen the feral humans, but now Mateo was feeling very risk averse. There was a word for it, used on a course he's attended while working for the council, though he couldn't remember it. He'd feel different when they were home again, in Big Town.

“Oh yes.....I'd always hated spam, damn stuff.....But now.” Said Helen. “Wonderful, food of the Gods.”

“Everything tastes better when you’re hungry, though I still hate semolina pudding.”

“I’m going to look at some of the Kingdom’s files, before it gets dark.” Said Helen.

He joined her, sat at a large table in what had probably once been the dining room. There was still glass in the windows and just for a moment, it felt like an ordinary day in their house, before the invasion had begun.

“Do you think they’re carrying on somewhere?” He asked. “The Kingdom I mean.”

“Maybe, in small groups, though I can’t see them demanding a tax anymore.”

Mateo found the map in a file marked MOD stores and resources. An old map of the UK, the sort used when they were sold in service stations, before everyone went electric and relied on PopNet to tell them the route. The map had to be a century old, a real collector’s item. Someone had written on it, tiny writing by someone taking a lot of care. He unfolded it across the table.

“It appears they’ve been keeping in touch with the remnants of the British Army.” He said.

“And Fifth West, some of the places are marked as Fifth West.”

Lots of dots on the map, some ringed around as if to mark them as more important. Dates too, someone had crossed through an entry for a military bunker a few miles north of Torquay.

“Destroyed.....Look, the date is just a few months ago.” Said Helen. “This thing has been kept up to date.”

Pages of hand written notes to go with the map, some in a far less clear hand. One note mentioned Fifth West being almost destroyed in Southern England and moving their key people to Filey.

“It seems Fifth West moved to Filey in Yorkshire.” Said Helen. “Lots of rings round it on the map, Filey must be their main base now.”

“Yorkshire though, we’d never get all that way, not with the kids.” He said. “They might as well be in Timbuktu.”

Helen began digging through several sheets of notes, all in the fairly scruffy handwriting.

“Here, I knew I’d seen something.” She said. “Fifth West are planning to launch their shuttles to leave Earth in about eighteen months, though this note is dated six months ago. It appears the senior people in the Kingdom were considering leaving with them.”

“Always the way isn’t it.....Leave their faithful minions behind.” Said Mateo.

“I know we’d need to think about it, but the map shows stores and bases right across the country. We could get to Filey in a year.....We could probably do the trip in a couple of months, maybe less.”

Mateo was tempted to say they were safe in Big Town, though he knew they weren’t. If the aliens didn’t arrive to destroy their home, it’d be the feral humans, or bandits, or the next self-appointed militia wanting a tax for their protection.

“They might not take us with them.” He said.

“They might though. We have to try.”

“We’d needs to talk it over with Jill and the kids.”

“Yes, of course. We don’t need to decide now.”

Mateo was beginning to warm to the idea, it offered a solution to the problem of giving their kids a future, rather than the continual firefighting. They read everything they could find on the Fifth West Filey Campus, until dusk made it impossible to read. Helen gathered up the papers and put them all back in the file. She handled the file with a kind of reverence, which he could understand.

“I’m taking these papers upstairs with us.” Said Helen.

They wedged the bedroom door closed, something done automatically if they were in a building that had any doors. Normally a night in a decent bed, with no kids to hear the sounds and they’d have

enjoyed a rare chance for sex, hot, steamy, noisy sex. They were both tired though and after a little kissing and touching they fell asleep.

~ ~

Iris Bouvard had always claimed to have forgotten her exact birthday, though she had admitted to being around eighty-eight years of age. Not a bad innings as several people had told Deb. Iris had died somewhere just about as safe as anywhere could be since the invasion. She'd died among people who loved her. No lingering death from something unpleasant, she'd passed away while taking an afternoon nap.

"I doubt if she felt a thing." Áslaug Kárason had told her.

No autopsy, no one in authority had felt it was required. Iris hadn't left a will exactly, just a single sheet of paper, with her handwritten instructions on it. Deb had found it in the old lady's bedside set of drawers. Iris wanted to be buried, which was quite rare since the funeral land act of twenty forty. The government had made it illegal to allocate land for new cemeteries, effectively making cremation the only way for most of the population. The campus had space and an existing graveyard though, so Francine had authorised a burial for Iris.

"I think we can even pull Hugo off shuttle duty, to make a headstone." Francine had told her.

Hugo was fairly elderly and before teaching anthropology, he'd once been a skilled amateur sculptor. No birth date on the stone, just Iris Bouvard and the date she'd died. Deb had consulted a handful of people on a few words to go on the headstone and finally decided on;

'Good friend, expert scavenger, loved by all who knew her.'

It was a little weird and quirky, though Deb knew Iris would have approved.

"Did you bury her in that fur coat?" Asked Pam Rath.

"I wasn't sure if she might have left it to someone, but she left all her things to me. I had them wrap her up in the coat.....She really loved it."

The aliens and their Bio-Bots had no respect for funerals, though the usual rules about meeting outside in large numbers had been relaxed, a little. No holiday for those building the shuttles, but Deb thought Iris would have been surprised at the size of the crowd watching her coffin being lowered into the ground.

"Did she have any religion?" Asked Art Singer. "I never remember her mentioning any particular faith."

"Iris quoted them all when it suited her." Said Deb. "She seemed to think, what were her words?.....Yes, she said calling on all the Gods every now and then was a good idea, hedging her bets she called it."

Art was with her, standing there next to her, Ramsay between them in a carry cot. Their union, the one that had brought about a son would never be formally recognised, but Deb had decided it was no longer going to be a guilty secret. If nothing else, the death of Iris had made her determined that Ramsay was going to have a father.

"I rarely get to do these things and Iris didn't make it easy for me." Said Francine. "Sometimes she claimed to be Jewish, at other times she was Buddhist. I believe she once claimed her family were old school Methodists. I am sure though, that whatever religion Iris called out to as she passed on, would welcome her into their own particular form of afterlife. We all loved Iris, we all....."

Deb listened to Francine and decided it had been right to ask her to say a few words as Iris was interred. Francine was the perfect person to give Iris a secular, non-secular, non-faith, multi-faith send off. Deb wasn't sure if there was anywhere we went after our three score and ten, or the four

score and eight Iris had lived. Funerals seemed to be about sorrow and hope though and she hoped Iris had gone somewhere.....Nice.

“Are you alright ?” Art asked her.

“Yes, I’ll cry now so I don’t cry later.”

There were others to speak, before Deb spoke last. She was determined to get her emotions under control before it was her turn. Of course, she’d mention that fur coat and the bottle of Potemkin vodka she’d put in the coffin next to her friend.

“A little something for the journey.” She muttered.

~ ~

Pandora Gray hadn’t known what to expect, though so far at least, everything surprised her. The sheer number of Vicky’s people was staggering, they covered the sides of entire buildings and carpeted open spaces. Their helicopter had been lifted by several dozen of the creatures, physically picked up and moved underground for safety. They were a truly formidable ally, as long as they remained an ally. If Vicky and her children defeated the aliens, would they share the rule of the planet with mankind ? Dora had read enough history to know that the strongest usually ruled.

“They’ve sent everything against us.” Said Vicky. “Huge numbers of all their various Bio-constructions, but never the accused bombs. They won’t risk hitting their royalty. We can deal with their ground forces; we’ve become very good at it.”

“Royalty.....Yes, a good description.” Said Ish.

As they entered Sara Bernhardt Square there were trees still standing and shrubs, another surprise in the midst of so much destruction. Vicky’s warriors had cleared the centre of plants and the usual furniture associated with a public park in Paris. Dora felt really exposed, the sounds of battle sounded so close. Vicky’s guards seemed fairly relaxed though and as for Ish ? He was like a kid waking up to open his presents on Christmas morning.

“Yes, the blue skin.....I saw that quite clearly.” Said Ish.

“We’ve kept these three and disposed of the others.” Said Vicky.

They were to choose one, that had been Ish’s weird telepathic deal with Vicky. In return Ish would explain how Vicky could use the remaining two elite aliens to best advantage. Dora wasn’t squeamish, or at least less squeamish than she had once been. She had to ask though.

“How many aliens were there ? Real aliens I mean, not their creatures.”

“Three hundred and eleven, including these three.” Said Vicky. “They must feel anger.....Their attacks are more intense since we killed the others.”

There they were, protected by nothing more than a few canvas screens. The three surviving aliens, three members of their elite, their royals. Agitated of course, Dora recognised the way Horace bobbed about when she was scared or anxious. They were exactly like Horace, apart from the areas of blue skin near their feet. The connections to their food and atmosphere spheres looked to have been done with more care than had been done for Horace, there was no oozing or bubbling.

“Urggh.....Ugly looking things.” Muttered one of Vicky’s guards.

Dora felt some sympathy for the aliens, they were scared and surrounded by enemies, plus they probably knew that over three hundred of their senior people had been killed. She had an idea that Ish was about to make them feel even more vulnerable.

“This may make them react quite strongly.” Said Ish. “Just keep them still as best you can and of course.....Don’t kill them.”

“My people are well disciplined Ishmael McGrath.” Said Vicky.

Horace had recorded the message very quickly before they'd left Filey. Dora understood the gist of what was said, but even the campus AI hadn't understood all the words. There was a lot of trust involved and they'd decided to trust Horace completely. Ish put the modified amplifier on the ground. It wasn't huge, nowhere near the size of the phones some had used before the invasion. The device could put out quite a few watts of sound though.

"I'm not sure if your people will hear this, Vicky." Said Ish. "The aliens mainly communicate in the subsonic range. You definitely won't understand it."

A few minutes of demands and threats in their own language, spoken by one of their own kind. Surely being threatened in their own language, by a traitor, as they would view it, had to shock them. Dora could hear nothing, only the green light on the device told her it was working. The agitation of the aliens became obvious fairly quickly. So many violent movements that they were in danger of breaking free of their life support spheres.

"Keep them still." Said Dora. "Hold them if you have to, they don't bite."

It was strange to watch Vicky's children handle the alien elite as though they were made of glass. Lots of gentle shoving to keep them still. There was disgust there too, the way they only touched the aliens when they really had to. When the aliens began to vibrate, Dora wasn't surprised, Horace had told them to expect it. Their skin began to ripple, as they vibrated. Vicky seemed to understand what was happening too.

"We've seen this before, in Indonesia." Said Vicky. "They're screaming for help."

~ ~

For Matt Newman, the trip along the east coast of England was like reliving holidays as a kid. The Eleanor had gone past Clacton-On Sea with its famous, if quite short, pier. They had intended to stop for fuel and supplies in Lowestoft, but there were far too many signs of alien activity. Maybe the aliens had faulty intelligence, or they'd mistaken tourist activity for military. Whatever the reason the harmless coastal town was a ruin. A burned-out ruin with no fresh sign of activity and they might have tempted to have a look around. There were fires still burning at the back of the town, so they'd decided to make reaching Grimsby their next short-term goal. It was pushing their fuel supplies a bit, though everyone had agreed. After watching Lowestoft burn, they'd wanted to head north and keep going.

"Weird how some places look almost intact." Said Doug.

"Once home to the world's largest fishing fleet." Said Matt. "We used to love holidays on the east coast when I was a kid. Filey is only a few miles along the coast, but we're down to our last drum of fuel."

"We must be able to find fuel here." Said Bren. "Apart from one burned out building, the place looks to have escaped the war."

Ela merely looked the town over and grunted, which sounded as though they all wanted to go ashore for a looting session. Bren took them in, she was now their agreed expert at such things. She managed to squeeze the Eleanor into a jetty next to a building with Grimsby Port River Terminal painted on the side. Up close it was obvious the boat behind them was waterlogged and the one in front wasn't much better.

"No explosions or fires, but something happened here." Said Matt.

"Call me over cautious, but the town looks too inviting." Said Doug.

"It might not look as good when we get there." Said Ela.

They were quite a way from the centre of town and Matt knew that a sea of perfect looking rooftops could be misleading. The walk through the docks was going to be long and fairly exposed. He didn't like it; all his instincts were saying something was wrong.

"Come on, I'm sure none of us fancies walking to Filey." He said. "We'll take weapons and backpacks, the usual essentials. First priority is fuel, then we'll do a little sightseeing."

Ela perked up at the mention of weapons and spent a while deciding which shotgun she fancied. She was still fussing over what to put in her pack, when everyone else was on deck, waiting to set off.

"One more minute." Yelled Bren. "Just one more minute and you can stay here, on guard duty."
"I'm coming.....I'm coming."

Fuel was easy, though hard work, as it always was. Someone had left a dozen or so drums of marine diesel at the end of the jetty, as though getting it ready to use. The fact that it was still there was another red flag to Matt. They shifted six drums onto the deck of the Eleanor. Tempting to suggest they left Grimsby and headed straight for Filey. The others looked ready to go looting though, and besides, they all need a little time on dry land.

"Next.....We hit the nearest supermarket." Said Bren.

Walking through the docks and into the centre of Grimsby was a trudge, a good mile after they walked the wrong way once or twice. At last though, their dream was there, right in front of them.

"Two hypermarkets, next door to each other." Said Doug. "I must have died and gone to heaven." Someone had done something dreadful to the doors, there was a huge hole where the front doors used to be. Matt looked inside, prepared for the worst, just lots of empty shelves.

"Wow.....Someone's made a mess, but wow." Said Ela. "Maybe we'll find ice cream."

"It will have all melted, honey." Said Bren.

There was damage and someone had toppled over an entire aisle of shelving. There was so much still there though, enough tinned food and clothing to feed and clothe a small army. The war had left an out-of-town hypermarket to be looted by the locals and there had to be a limit on how much they could carry. Or of course, there might not be any locals. Matt's senses were tingling again.

"We'll need trolleys....Make sure you don't get a wonky wheel one." Said Bren.

"I'll keep watch....Enjoy yourselves." He said.

After a while he joined in the lootfest, helping Bren fill a large trolley. It was so much after such a long period of scratching about for a few tins here and there. Matt actually felt greedy, as he added three tins of salmon to Bren's trolley. No ice cream, though Ela had found a few packets of junk food she liked.

"It's too good to be true." Said Bren.

"I know, something isn't right about Grimsby.....I just can't work out what." He replied. "People should have been walking for miles to empty this place. I bet the other hypermarket next door is just as full of goodies."

It was and even though they had more food than they could remember having in years, there was the temptation to collect more. There was an old-fashioned anarchy symbol on the wall near the checkouts, a large crossed through A. Beneath it someone had spray painted that the store was now claimed by the Grimsby Militia. Ela nodded in the direction of the sign.

"There are similar signs painted everywhere we've been." Said Bren. "They usually mean nothing."

"Still, I'll be glad to be back on the boat again." Said Doug.

Finding the right trolleys with no wonky wheels paid off, their trudge back through the docks was a quiet one. A long way, though quicker now they knew the route. All tired but happy, they might have walked into the argument, if they hadn't heard a gunshot.

“What the hell.....” Began Doug.

“Quiet.....I’ll take a look.” Said Matt.

A grubby warehouse wall gave him cover, though he was too far away from the Eleanor to hear or see any details. A group of people were clustered around their boat, at least fifty people. They were arguing about something, one fired into the air, probably to show that he or she meant business.

“Looks like we found the Grimsby Militia.” Said Bren.

He’d have actually been disappointed if she hadn’t followed him, curious obstinacy suited her style.

“Yeah.....And sadly I think we can say goodbye to the Eleanor.” He said.

“Ela will be upset; she loved that boat.”

“I’m upset, it’s a hell of a long walk to Filey.”

There were some people on the deck of their boat, though most were still on the jetty. Someone on the jetty pushed someone else over and a lot of shouting began.

“Who are they ?” Asked Doug.

Yes, he was there, obstinacy seemed to be the order of the day. Ela was there too, looking around the warehouse wall. Not that being covert seemed that important, the arguments on the jetty were getting louder and quite heated. Ela could have probably danced outside the warehouse without being noticed.

“We think it’s the local militia.” Said Bren.

“What are they doing with our boat ?” Asked Ela.

“I’m sure they think of it as their boat now.” Said Matt.

It was frustrating to see the argument going on, but not close enough to hear it. Some of the people on the jetty began to fight with their fist and someone on the Eleanor fired into the air. Maybe the argument was over their weapons, someone had Matt’s weapon chest open on the deck. It went from a few blows to using guns very quickly.

Ela screamed as the gunfire began, though Matt didn’t think it mattered. Hand guns, shotguns, even assault rifles firing on fully automatic. It sounded as though the Grimsby Militia weren’t short of weapons and ammunition. Maybe too many weapons, it seemed hard to imagine many surviving the battle. Matt had seen chaotic battles before though; he knew a surprising number would still be standing when it was over.

“They’re crazy people.” Bren yelled above the noise.

A bullet must have hit some explosives on the Eleanor, or a hot round managed to ignite a drum of diesel fuel. The blast was massive, for a few minutes the boat and the jetty were full of flames. Bren held Ela, turning her head away from the scene. Some hadn’t died immediately; a few burning people ran towards the edge of the jetty. Covered in flames, they leapt into the ocean. Without medical care though, Matt didn’t give much for their chances.

“Why are they still fighting ?” Asked Ela.

There was no answer, Matt had experienced the red mist one or two times himself. The mission lost, all sensible goals unachievable, yet something keeps your finger pulling the trigger. The crazy militia people who never stopped fighting, might well explain why no looters had felt brave enough to empty the local supermarkets. Some of them were still alive, still fighting, still firing enormous amounts of ammunition at each other.

“We need to go Matt.” Said Bren.

Matt hadn’t totally given up on getting their boat back, deserting the Eleanor felt like leaving a fallen comrade behind. As he saw her on fire from stem to stern, he knew it was time to admit defeat.

“We’re going now everyone.” He said. “If we follow the coast north, we’ll eventually reach Filey.”

“How far is it ?” Asked Ela.

Tempting to tell her the as the crow flies number, but four people shoving supermarket trolleys cross country.....It was going to be twice as far with all the diversions and obstacles on the way.

“We’ll need to go inland for a while, to cross the Humber.” He said. “Then.....At least a hundred miles Ela, maybe more if we need to avoid trouble.”

“A hundred miles, we can’t walk a hundred miles.” Said Ela.

“We can, quite easily.” Said Doug. “You’ll see.....Just a few days of long walks.”

“Very long walks.” Added Bren.

~ ~

Ishmael ignored the screaming aliens and the worried look Biff was giving him. Vicky was probably concerned too, though he hadn’t quite mastered reading her facial expressions. He sat down, cross legged in front of the subsonic device and set it to play Horace’s message for a second time. He ignored all the sounds and smells of war, closing his eyes to cut out the turmoil going on around him. He used his gift from the original Horace, triggered in a conscious way he didn’t yet understand. He was suddenly inside the minds of the three aliens. Leaders of the leaders of their people, royalty was the only way to describe them. Unelected heads of their world, who’d only come down to the surface of the Earth, because their AI systems had told them it was safe to do so.

“Then Vicky found you.” He muttered.

He understood a few sounds in their language, though he could communicate with them in the basic way every intelligent being understands, almost as soon as they’re born. Imagery, intense and merciless imagery. He projected a few of his memories into their minds, images of war, memories Vicky had given him of the aliens being defeated, right across Asia. They’d been cossetted all their lives, shielded from the harsh realities of war and all the violence that went with it. Two of them tried to block his images, but not one. The alien to his far left was a little different, he was the leader, the final decision maker in western Europe. Ish opened his eyes and stood up and for a moment it looked like all of Paris was in flames.

“It must have been the screams, more of their machines have landed.” Said Vicky.

As he looked around, Ish realised most of the explosions were to the north. He briefly saw a huge mechanical device, as if someone had put a tank on four huge legs. It looked so huge, so unstoppable, so certain to win, yet within seconds Vicky’s warriors had sent it crashing to the ground.

“We keep learning and these machines.....They’re not hard to destroy.” Said Vicky.

One of Vicky’s children muttered at her, Ish thought it was Drei, though he wasn’t certain.

“They’re landing in a cemetery to the north.” Said Vicky. “My children will stop them being any further annoyance. Have you decided who is the king, Ishmael ?”

“Not really a king, more of a.....Baron, the Baron of western Europe. I’ll take this one, the other two are yours.”

The alien flinched as he gently touched it, they really were terrified. He hoped he’d be braver if the situation was ever reversed, though he doubted it. It was fear of the unknown, the beings from another world had no idea what might happen to them.

“Good, I’ll have the Baron put in your helicopter. It’s fiddly work, their spheres make moving them difficult. There is time, would you like to see the machine my children just destroyed ?”

“I should stay with our new alien.” Said Biff.

“Then it’s just me to see the mechanical monster.” Said Ish.

Vicky's children were clambering over the huge dead machine, stripping out various parts. It had only been there a few minutes, yet the weapons were already gone. It seemed amazing that they weren't all dead.

"It looks so.....Unstoppable." Said Ish.

"We think they're mass producing these somewhere, as a sort of weapon of last resort, Ish. They look terrifying, but they're actually easier to destroy than a large green. No energy weapons, they fire a mixture of rockets and good old-fashioned bullets. My children try to avoid the rockets, but the bullets.....They're merely an annoyance."

As he walked around the fallen war machine, Ish could see it hadn't been built as well as the robots in the early days of the invasion. Metal edges were rough, cabling fitted externally. It was still a dangerous machine, though it looked like something created quickly, out of desperation.

"No internal AI, they use two of the human looking Bio-Bots to act as crew." Said Vicky. "We're stripping the weapons out, but as for the rest....My tech people say they could build something better."

"Do you think the tide is turning, Vicky ? Can your children beat these things ?"

"Right now, things look good, but when the atmosphere is to their liking. They'll come out of the ground in their billions and things could change."

"Yes, we're working on that." Said Ish.

~ ~

Lianne had banned Nigel from the hangar, they just ended up fooling around for hours. The kissing and touching had been nice, really nice, it was just that it wasn't going to help get the Nostromo launched and out of the atmosphere. Her father was busy turning the Ekranoplan into a fully armed ocean-going war machine and she had the Nostromo to finish. As always happened, it had all become far too competitive. She suspected Sgt Barwood had bet on her winning, he was being very cooperative.

"Do you have everything you need ?" He asked her. "I can probably spare another couple of electricians if you need them."

"No, we're already up to full strength."

In truth working on the Nostromo was like working inside a Swiss watch, everything had been crammed into small tight places. Her and three decent engineers was the optimum number. Any more and they'd be getting in each other's way. A thought suddenly entered her mind.

"If I don't take them, will you offer them to JV ?" She asked.

"Yes, probably."

"Alright, send them to me, I'm sure they won't mind playing cards for hours."

"I'm sure they won't Lianne."

Barwood definitely had bet on her to finish first, he was grinning from ear to ear. He'd also made sure she'd obtained the front facing cannon from the Ekranoplan. Her father had something else in mind for his ocean-going beast. Russian engineers tend to have a belt and braces approach to everything and the cannon would work in a vacuum, it could be fired in space. An eager young engineer was fitting it into the front nacelle.

"Bit of a tight fit, but it shouldn't shake anything apart if you fire it." He said.

"I'll take you on the test flight when I test fire it."

"Great."

His confidence was encouraging, though there were still so many flashing warning lights when she had the courage to let the self-diagnostics do their thing. Power was now fine and the engines had

been test fired, in simulation at least. The real test would be once the Nostromo was allowed to take off vertically and race towards the edge of the atmosphere.

“Weapons are great.” She said. “Having breathable air and a little heat would be better. We’ll start on the life support systems next. Who speaks fluent Russian ?”

Only one hand went up, she’d have to make sure that soldier didn’t do anything dangerous for a while. Most of the spares from St Petersburg came with instruction in Russian, so the woman with her hand up.....Was fairly indispensable.

“Alright.....You’re now our official translator.” Said Lianne.

~ ~

Steve Penboss had woken up feeling stiff, sore all over and unwilling to wake up properly. His body felt like it had been pummelled and abused, which of course it had. The ocean waves and the storm had given him a thorough beating. Alejandro had come off worst of any of them, he still had a slightly glazed look in his eyes.

“Probably mild concussion, there’s no way to be sure.” Tracy had said.

The storm had died down, though it had left the torrential rain to torment them. Steve fancied a walk though, his stiff legs needed stretching before he seized up. Daisy agreed to go with him and Maria. He seemed to be her hero at the moment, for some reason he didn’t quite understand. And where Maria went, Billy tended to follow. They must have looked a strange foursome, as they left the hut full of council supplies.

“Check if there’s any of our things on the beach.” Said Jada.

“That’ll be the first thing we do.” Said Daisy.

His clothes were wet and clammy already, and the rain made it feel worse. Steve had hoped the boat might have shifted further down the beach with the tide, but it had gone. Really gone, there were pieces of debris on the beach.

“Look, someone’s bag.” Yelled Maria.

Not just an intact looking leather bag, a couple of suitcases had been dumped by the tide. There looked to be a few boxes too, that might well contain food and supplies.

“To be honest, I thought we’d find an empty beach.” Said Daisy.

“Come on.....Let’s make a game of it.” He yelled. “Drag what you can, anything that looks useful. We’ll pile it all up near the hut.”

To the kids anything useful meant anything and everything. Steve was amazed at the size and weight of the junk the two kids managed to drag across wet sand. About half the pile looked genuinely useful, including two boxes of tinned food.

“Looks like we won’t starve after all.” Said Steve.

“Guess who the bag belongs to ?” Asked Daisy.

“Jada, it has to be.”

“Yep, got it in one.”

“Just remember that a happy Jada is nicer to have around than a grumpy one.”

~ ~