

Ishmael

Chapter 22 - Escape

“Pandora’s head began to fill with worries about what might have escaped from somewhere and become a feral, hungry beast. The papers had been full of stories about wealthy people in the suburbs who kept large cats illegally.”



That was the problem with becoming totally absorbed in the intricate plans for your own act of rebellion. Others were getting angry too, forming their own less subtle ideas. The right hand side of the soldier’s head had gone, probably taken away by an explosion, or maybe a bullet. For a few seconds Mateo Lopez looked at the blood and body parts he really didn’t want to admit were bits of the soldier’s brain. He froze, just as his wife had frozen when he’d told her they’d have to leave without their daughter.

“I know Tina is only eight, but she plays with other kids all over the bunker. Am I supposed to follow her about all day ? This is the bunker, we know everyone and they know us. She should have been safe. Would have been if those idiots hadn’t..... We need to leave Helen.”

Tina, their extrovert and over active daughter. She knew everyone in the bunker and had even added one or two invisible friends into the mix. His wife had cried a lot and then had come the fighting, even clawing at his face with her nails. To Mateo it was a simple choice of saving the family he had left, or remaining in the bunker and dying with everyone else.

“You could at least look for her you bastard. You seem determined to abandon our child. Ray will restore order again..... We could always stay here.”

“There is no here anymore, the bunker is finished Helen. Ray will order his guards to defend the outside doors to the last man, you know he will. We can both hear the explosions and gunfire..... We either leave or we’ll die.”

That had all been on the upper levels, they’d found the dead soldier quite near the entrance to the disused roadway. No one was supposed to know the significance of the older sections of the bunker, only him and a very select few. As they went down a ramp, the dusty ground was red with blood and two more dead soldiers had been left leaning on the tunnel wall. More ominously, there was a dead resident of the bunker leant next to them.

“I know him it’s Allan, one of Marjorie’s people.... I second cousin of hers I think. He was a council maintenance worker.”

Poor Tom was still keeping a bit of a distance from them both, which made it impossible to stop him seeing things no six year old should ever witness. The boy hadn’t understood why his parents had been fighting. He was crying again, Mateo was worried that his son might not stop crying. He knelt in front of Tom and held his hand.

“Everything will be alright Tom. It might not seem so now, but quite soon you’ll forget all about today. I just need you to know that your mother and I love you.”

“I know dad.”

Helen was crouching next to the dead body, which was a little creepy, but at least it meant she was showing an interest in things again. For a while she’d simply followed him in a daze, going the wrong way more than once.

"You're right, it is Allan." She said. "How would he know where to come, everyone avoids the old tunnels..... Too many rats."

Tom flinched at the mention of rats, something else to add to the catalogue of horrors for a day he doubted any of them would really forget. Mateo checked his watch, unable to believe how quickly everything had happened. Just forty minutes ago he'd been picking up their food ration from the stores. Helen had been in the partitioned off part of the bunker they thought of as home. Tom had been with her, while Tina had been out somewhere, playing with her friends, real and imaginary. Just forty minutes ago the firing had begun and their world had been turned upside down. He was just grateful he'd already put together two escape bags, a couple of backpacks containing a little food, water and other essentials.

"It had to be Marjorie who caused all this." Said his wife. "You said she changed after the last two executions, wanting to leave the bunker that night."

"She was upset; all of us in the Civilian Council were upset. You might be right though, she did change..... And she tended to think everyone was safe to talk to."

The next down ramp brought them to another dead soldier. Mateo was never going to get used to seeing the dead bodies of Ray's guards, but already the shock had begun to ease. He even picked up the assault rifle the man had been carrying.

"No one took his weapon." Said Helen. "That probably means the guards are chasing after someone, moving fast."

The explosion came before they'd even reached the first of the great blast doors. Muffled sounds of gunfire and explosions had been their constant companions since the revolt had started, but this explosion was different. Tom screamed and grabbed his leg, as the intense sound hurt their ears and caused the ground to move slightly under their feet. The emergency lighting in the old tunnels had never been good. As two lights shattered and went out, the poor lighting went from being a nuisance to dangerous.

"It's alright Tom. I brought flashlights..... We're going to be fine."

His son was whimpering and holding on tight to his leg, until Mateo found the flashlight in his pack. By the time Helen had turned her flashlight on, there was more than enough light to see by.

"It had to have been Marjorie." He said. "Only the two of us knew the code to set off the explosives. Well..... With luck we'll find a way open to the outside, once we get there."

"Stupid..... She should have warned us." Said Helen.

The roadway was at the bottom of the ramp and then the first of the great blast doors. Hundreds of tons of hardened steel and concrete, designed to resist everything apart from a direct hit from an enemy nuclear missile. There was a way for people to get past the huge door though, a bypass corridor. Only if they knew the right combination for the mechanical door lock and had a key.

"I'm not surprised it's open." Said Helen. "See..... We'll be fine Tom, just like your dad said. Not far to go now."

It must be horrific to be six years old and seeing your parents fight. Really fight; a fight where they seem to be trying to injure each other. Kids are resilient though and Tom was grinning at his mum. They were in the narrow blast door bypass corridor, when the gunfire started. It was close, loud and most of it sounded to be the bark of automatic weapons.

"Sounds like the guards caught up with them, whoever they are." Said Mateo. "We should stay here until they stop firing.....One side has to win and I'm hoping it's ours."

"What happens if the guards win?" Asked Helen.

Mateo wanted to say they'd be fucked. Tom had seen and heard enough already and didn't need to hear his dad swearing. Mateo nodded in the direction of the gunfire and held his wife's hand.

"Just hope that our side wins." He muttered.

An assault rifle can almost cut a car in half, making it look as though a huge can opener had been used on the metal. In a confined space with no cover and used on soft human flesh..... The gunfire ended quite quickly. Tom was holding onto his mum's leg as they came out and saw the carnage.

"Don't look Tom, there are bad things here." Said Helen. "Try not to look, alright?"

"I won't mum."

The good news was the daylight coming in through a huge hole in the tunnel wall. Rubble had fallen from the hill above and it would be a difficult climb, but they could get out of the bunker.

"They're all dead..... Let's get out of this dreadful place." Said Helen.

The amount of blood was turning his stomach. Hot fresh blood had a certain smell and it was making him want to puke. There was one reason to look around though, an important reason.

"You know Ray, always the best for his guards." He said. "They will have flashlights and one of them will be carrying the spare ammunition bag. And you need a weapon..... No good shaking your head at me... There are worst things out there than Ray and his guards."

"Alright..... Alright, but just a quick look around."

The two sides in the battle hadn't quite annihilated each other. As Mateo looked through the hole in the tunnel wall, he saw about six people running down the hillside. Too far away to see if they were soldiers or civilians.

"Whoever they are, I don't begrudge them their freedom." He said. "Ray became a tyrant, his guards were too scared to disobey him."

Like Queens of old, Marjorie was surrounded by the dead bodies of those who'd died trying to defend her. There wasn't much left of Marjorie's face to recognise, just one grey eye and her tidy hair cut into a bob.

"Crap ! What a shambles..... What a bloody shambles." Said Helen.

"Can we go mum?" Asked Tom. "I'm scared."

"Just one more minute honey."

There was no sign of Ray, though a few of the guards seemed to have been caught in the blast when the wall was blown out. A few of the smouldering body parts might have been all that remained of Ray, it was impossible to tell. Mateo quickly picked up a clean and undamaged assault rifle, handing it to Helen.

"No blood on it, I checked." He told her. "And I can see a bag of spare ammunition."

As he pulled at the bag, the guard next to it reacted, trying to pick up his rifle. Mateo stamped on his hand and kicked it away. The soldier had about three bullet holes in him, one in his chest. It was amazing he still lived, though probably not for much longer.

"What happened here?" Asked Mateo.

"Fuck you."

"You're dying..... Where's the harm in telling us." Said Helen.

The guard coughed and looked at Helen and then Tom.

"I saw his sister..... I remember you now, the smart arse in the civilian council."

"Where did you see our daughter?" Asked Mateo.

"Some of us saw her hiding behind the dryers in the laundry room on your level. We never told Ray, the commander, he was acting really strange by then. We thought he might order us to kill her or something. Nice kid..... Might still be there."

The guard stopped talking and when Mateo felt his neck for a pulse, there wasn't one.

"Damn, now we'll never know who attacked who down here." He said.

"We have to go back." Said Helen. "Now we know where she might be..... We have to go back."

"No !" Snapped Mateo. "I can move quicker on my own and we're not having the same fight all over again. Promise me you'll take Tom out of here and that you won't come back."

"But she's my daughter too..... With two of us looking....."

"No, No, you either give me your word not to follow me or I won't go back and look for her.....I mean it, I'll drag you out of here if I have to. Give me your word."

"Alright, you have my word, I won't follow you."

"Good, good.....Find somewhere to hide, a group of trees will do. Just make sure you can see the entrance to the tunnel. Give me a day and if I haven't come out by then.....Move on, find a safe place."

He held her, kissing her with some passion in case it was their last kiss. He knelt to hug poor Tom, who was crying again. His parents arguing and then acting strange, it had to be hard for him to understand.

"I have to go to fetch Tina. Look after your mum Tom, do what she tells you.....Be good."

"I will, I'm always good."

He hugged Helen again, trying to make up for the words he'd said in anger.

"I love you..... Please keep your promise. Don't follow back into the bunker."

"I won't, I'll find somewhere to hide and wait for you...I love you."

Mateo watched them climb over the rubble and walk towards a small wood near the bottom of the hill. At one point Helen turned and waved at him.

"I love you.....I love you both." He called out, as he waved back.

They were too far away to hear, though he hoped his wife was calling out something similar to him. As his wife and son disappeared into the woods, he turned and went back into the bunker.

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Brenda Grundy didn't enjoy carrying the SatLink comms unit about, but it did have one huge advantage; there was no keeping secrets from her. All order from headquarters, all supply drops, all changes of personnel, she knew them all. There was something big going on, orders had been pending for far too long for it to be the usual bureaucratic delay. She comforted herself with one thought. If she didn't know what was going on, then neither did anyone else.

"Don't worry about it, they'll give us our orders when they're good and ready." Said Matt. "We got the resupply drop after all, enough ammunition and explosives to give Duncan a hard on for a week."

"Oi..... Behave." She said. "Don't let him hear you say that."

"He's hardly likely to be hiding under our bed."

Bren blushed as he said it, even though everyone knew they had a bed each, but only ever used one of them. It was just that her family were a little old fashioned. Her mum used to call women like her whores and home wreckers. True Matt was married, she'd even met his wife a couple of times, usually at one of the Christmas dinners somewhere. Marriage and the implied obligations to wives and husbands was part of that world though; the pre-invasion world that no longer existed.

"But supposing the aliens land another device and we never get fresh orders. What will you do then?" She asked.

"Look after the civilians until they're ready to travel. One or two still have urgent medical requirements. Then..... To be honest there are worst things than staying here for a while."

“But the aliens might attack.”

“Hmmmmmm Bren..... Do you think it’s our super weapons that have kept us safe ? Personally I believe they don’t think we’re worth attacking, as long as we leave them alone. They’re obviously using all their resources to protect the landing sites.”

He was tickling her and asking him about anything serious was impossible while she was giggling. It was quite difficult trying to be serious while naked and impossible while naked and giggling.

“Stop tickling me Matt..... We can’t stay here forever..... It just isn’t right.”

“We won’t have to, orders will arrive.... Just be patient.”

She looked across at the comms unit and leant out a finger to press the link test.

“Green light, we still have a live SatLink.” She said. “Seriously though, you must have thought about what to do if we lose contact with headquarters.”

He went to tickle her again, so she grabbed his hand and looked hard into his eyes.

“Tell me Matt..... Convince me I haven’t fallen for an idiot.”

“Oi Grundy..... That is insubordination soldier.”

No good, his mouth and more importantly, his tongue were moving over her tummy and moving down. Some devil inside her made her grab his head.

“Alright Bren..... The civilians need two weeks to heal up. Then we’d use the vehicles for the old and young, the rest would have to walk. I’m guessing we’d head south, though we’ll have two weeks to decide on where to go..... Happy now ?”

“Yes.”

Bren went to a very nice place in her head, as his tongue found the place she loved to be licked. The comms unit began to beep loudly at just the wrong moment, it had done it before. SatLink interruptus they’d begun to call it.

“Oh Fuck.” Said Matt.

“Chance would be a fine thing.”

Bren rolled off the edge of the bed, grabbing the microphone in one smooth motion.

“Yes ?”

“Hello Base Crawford, is that you Bren ?”

“It is, have our orders come through ?”

“Not quite yet..... I have someone on a link for Matt. A link from the Fifth West Campus in North Yorkshire.”

Bren felt her cheeks flush as a female voice came on the link. She clamped her hand over the microphone and felt sweat on her brow as she looked at Matt.

“Matt.....It’s your wife.”

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“Don’t walk on the live rail Kata.” Said Pandora Gray.

“But there’s no power.”

“I know, but it’s a bad habit. Would you point a gun at your head and pull the trigger if you knew it had no bullets in it ?”

“No of course not.”

“Same thing.....Keep away from the live rail.” Said Pandora.

“Do as you’re told Kata.” Said her mother.

Kata gave one of her sighs, Pandora was getting used to them. It was a sigh that seemed to consign her mother and every other adult into the boring oldie category. She was a sensible girl though, she’d keep away from live rails in future.

"We've an abandoned train in Covent Garden Station." Shouted one of the soldiers.

"Usually routine, we'll wait here until you've checked it out." Yelled Penny.

"Can I go and watch the soldiers?" Asked Antun.

"No." Replied Inka Malovic.

At first the kids had moaned about having to be underground in the tube tunnels. Now they were enjoying it far too much and needed watching all the time. Still, it was better than having them in a bad mood and shuffling along like zombies.

"At least this train is in a station." Said Ish. "We don't have to squeeze past it carrying equipment."

"I just wish we weren't waiting in the dark." Said Inka. "Sometimes.....I think I can see something move in the darkness."

"Just your eyes playing tricks." Said Penny. "We've soldiers in front of us and behind, even a few rushing about to check the trackside cabinets we're walking past. You're safer here than walking on the streets and Central London is now too hot for a helicopter to pick us up."

"But..... Who will keep the soldiers safe?" Asked Kata.

"They watch each out for each other." Said Ish.

Well done Ish, he was learning. Kata had become even more attached to one of the Fifth West soldiers called Darius. Pandora had accidentally walked into a room where they'd been making out. It took about twenty minutes for the leader of the soldiers to come and talk quietly with Penny.

"We can move on now, but there are dead bodies near the train." Said Penny.

Everyone had seen dead bodies before, even Inka's kids. Pandora knew that out of them all, it was Penny who would be most upset by the physical presence of death.

"Oh.... This backpack seems to be getting heavier." Said Ish.

The plan was to follow the Piccadilly Line, coming out of the tunnels when they reached Green Park. Getting out of a helicopter could be done in thirty seconds, but getting into one with two teenagers and lots of fragile equipment....Far too dangerous for Central London, almost suicidal. Two Fifth West helicopters were going to pick them up in Green Park. Penny held her arm, keeping her back until Inka and her family were out of earshot.

"The soldiers think the bodies aren't from the train." She said. "They look to have been brought here, dragged down from the street."

"Why? Is something feeding on them?" Asked Pandora.

Poor Penny, her head seemed to even nod at her in a nervous way.

"Might be rats." Said Ish.

"Dragging dead people down here.....I don't think so." Said Penny.

"The soldiers know their job." Said Pandora. "Come on, we need to keep up with the others."

She could see Ish trying not to stare at the bodies jammed up against one wall. Bodies that had been chewed at, whole limbs ripped off and presumably eaten. Penny hadn't mentioned the droppings, which were everywhere. Large, long pieces of dirt coloured faeces from whatever had brought the bodies underground to feed on. Mercifully the darkness hid much of the horror, though even the most stygian darkness couldn't have hidden the stench of death. Ish leant in close enough to whisper.

"Aliens don't leave droppings, unless this is something new." He said.

"Might be something that escaped from the Regents Park Zoo."

"Or maybe a pack of things." Said Ish.

"The soldiers are nervous. Darius is keeping closer to Kata."

Pandora's head began to fill with worries about what might have escaped from somewhere and become a feral, hungry beast. The papers had been full of stories about wealthy people in the suburbs who kept large cats illegally. One article had mentioned there were likely to be more tigers in private zoos in London, than were left in the whole of Asia.

"Crap..... I'm turning into Penny." She muttered.

"Are you alright ?" Whispered Ish.

"Yes....Fine now. I realised that even a whole pack of tigers isn't a match for one soldiers with a modern assault rifle."

The stench of decay and corruption stayed with them as they walked. There was even still a trace of it in the air when they reached Leicester Square Station.

"We'll stop here to rest and eat lunch." Shouted Penny. "An hour, not a minute longer."

"I know this backpack will feel ten pounds heavier when I put it on again." Said Ish. "I think the damn thing is cursed or something."

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"I know the toilet flushes Iris." Shouted Deb. "Keep doing it every five minutes and Louise will come and moan at us again. I'm sure neither of us wants that."

"We've talked about this dear.....I refuse to discuss my personal bodily functions." Iris shouted back.

"I was your nurse..... Would you rather discuss your flushing obsession with Louise ?"

They'd been given accommodation with two bedrooms, a lounge, kitchen and most importantly to Iris, a bathroom with a toilet that flushed. For campus accommodation the small apartment was pretty good. A lot better than some of the army homes provided for married couples. The bathroom door opened and an upset looking Iris came out.

"I've come to the conclusion that Louise has a few issues." Said Iris.

Deb Newman tended to agree, though she did have some empathy for Louise Olvera. A senior human resources manager, she'd been head hunted by Fifth West for their new North Yorkshire Campus in Filey. Even before the invasion there had been problems associated with the campus and after the invasion, they'd been reduced to a skeleton staff. Everyone was given a few extra jobs to do and Louise had been given HR and Admin. Not a problem when the place was quiet, but Fifth West were bringing the campus back to life.

"I get all the crap jobs." Louise had told them, often. "Admin seems to mean getting all the rubbish to sort out, crap no one else wants to do."

Deb sympathised to a point, but she had been a nurse for years. Getting all the crap jobs no one else wanted sort of summed much of nursing. One thing Deb was sure about was that Louise and her mood, had affected her own.

"Is it dinner time yet ?" Asked Iris. "I'm starving."

"Another two hours..... We have our own kitchen Iris. Make yourself a sandwich."

They had fresh bread, a real treat. The campus baked their own, they even had a large stock of flour. Iris had been playing for sympathy a little, accentuating a limp on the leg which had healed a long time ago. Iris wanted a bit of attention, maybe a little affection too. Deb could understand that, she had the same feelings.

"I'm not sure dear.....Using a breadknife with my arthritis." Muttered Iris.

"Would you like me to make you a cheese sandwich ?"

"Yes please dear."

The campus had their own small farm with quite a few livestock. The aliens had largely ignored them, but Francine had told her keeping hungry people out of the farm had been a real problem for a while.

“We can’t feed the entire world and if we’d tried to feed all the hungry people who attempted to raid our supplies we’d have ended up starving..... Anyway, we haven’t had anyone try to raid the place in quite a while.”

Francine Lazan was the base commander with Art Singer as her science officer. A strange leadership with the titles reminding Deb of old Sci-Fi films. It appeared Fifth West had a science officer as second in command at all their facilities.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you.”

Iris accepted her cheese sandwich with a smile and Deb felt that warm glow, the glow that had probably made her become a nurse. She was one of life’s natural carers and it was something she had to accept. If aura’s really existed, she was certain hers indicated someone you could tell anything to. It was just that sometimes..... Deb wanted to swap out her aura for something a little fiercer, more heroic.

The campus was on lockdown, though they’d welcomed them in with open arms. It was the reason for that welcome which stung.

“Have I left it long enough ?” Asked Iris.

“No, stop flushing the toilet. Clean filtered water is precious.”

Deb had stood at the front doors, hoping for..... Actually she wasn’t sure. Ideally someone would have told her she’d been expected.

“Come in mighty traveller on the road less travelled. Your arrival was foretold to us. The old lady you’ve befriended may enter too. Please sit by the fire and tell us your words of wisdom.”

A silly fantasy, but she’d seen it happen in lots of old movies. In truth they hadn’t been expecting her and they might have been sent away if Francine Lazan hadn’t recognised her name.

“It can’t be..... Do you have a husband in the army ?”

“Yes, Matthew Newman. He’s with the Australian forces in the Northern Territories, or he was before the invasion stopped all the phones from working.”

That was it, the glad handing had begun, though Deb found she still wasn’t fully trusted. Could she really be the wife of the great man himself, the hero of the hour. After her picture was found on the Fifth West database, they really had been treated like visiting VIPs. Not that she resented Matt his fame. She was proud of him, immensely proud. If only they’d let her in because of herself, because of who she was.

“Are you alright dear ?” Asked Iris. “I thought you’d be happier.”

“I’m fine, really. I just still think that there’s a reason I had to come here.”

“You were right dear. They did let us in..... You were even right about the working toilet.”

At least she was a hero to Iris and that had to count for something. There was a bell on the door, though no one seemed to use it. Three loud thumps on the outside door told them someone was at the door. Art Singer was there, grinning at her like an over excited Cheshire cat.

“Your phone will ring in a moment.” He said. “I’ll take Iris to the communal lounge to give you some privacy.”

Deb had noticed the phone and decided it was a relic from the past, a now useless lump of plastic.

“What do you mean ?” She asked.

“Mr Jaroslav Verga arranged it, as a thank you. A direct link bounced around all over the globe. It’s a great honour.”

“I’m sure it is, if I knew what you were talking about.”

The phone rang and sounded like one of the dreadful retro trim phones which had been ‘a thing,’ a few years before.

“Go on, pick it up.” Said Art. “They’ll be connecting the other end of the call. You can talk to Matt, your husband.”

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Tyler Bates was woken up out of a deep sleep by his crying daughter, Tirsa. Later he began to associate that day with people crying. Winter was an ideal time to sort out the garden so that they could grow vegetables the following spring. The ground was muddy but not frozen, perfect for digging over. He’d gone to bed late and didn’t really want to wake up so early.

“Wake up dad, wake up.” Pleaded Tirsa. “Mum is sat outside and won’t talk to me. I think Tonya might be.....I think she’s dead.”

It was still dark; no light was coming through the gap in the bedroom curtains. Tyler’s first thought was that Tirsa was using one of their precious flashlights to wake him up. His mind finally woke up enough to take in what she’d said.

“She’s probably just sleeping.” He said.

Zane was stood by the door, shaking his head at him. Tonya had been very ill and in pain the day before, but dead..... No, there had to be some kind of mistake. Tyler was going to roll out of bed, until he realised he was naked under the blankets.

“What does your mum think ?”

“I told you dad..... She’s sat outside and won’t talk to us.” Said Tirsa.

“It’s cold out dad, really cold.” Said Zane.

Zane was crying and he almost never cried, even when he was small.

“Alright..... Both of you; outside, I need to get dressed.”

If only his brain woke up at the same speed as his body. Tyler did his shirt up on the wrong buttons and had to start all over again. The same grubby jeans as the day before and no sock. Tyler slid his feet into a pair of muddy boots and left the bedroom. His children were waiting just outside the door.

“You can get a fire going in the lounge Zane, before we all freeze.”

He put his arms around his daughter and hugged her.

“And you can come with me.”

An advantage of having a large old house, was that everyone had their own bedroom. Tonya’s bed seemed almost lost in the huge bedroom at the back of the house. His youngest daughter was covered in just about every spare blanket the family possessed.

“She was so cold dad.....We just wanted to keep her warm.”

Tyler pulled back the blankets a little and felt his daughter’s face. There was some warmth there, but not enough. Her arm was stiff, as he tried to find a pulse that wasn’t there. An aunt had once told him horror stories about people being buried alive.

“There’s a small mirror in the top drawer of our dressing table Tirsa.”

While she searched he lifted the heap of blankets up and saw the dark shadow on Tonya’s tummy. Liza seemed to think it was caused by internal bleeding. To him it looked like a terrible bruise, which had grown since the last time he’d seen it.

“Found it dad.”

Tyler held the mirror to Tonya's mouth, praying that it showed a little misting. When it didn't, he held the mirror to his own lips to make sure whatever was supposed to happen, really did happen. There was a definite film of vapour on the mirror.

"I'm not a doctor Tirsia..... Crap, I fix roofs for a living, or I did. I've done all the tests I know and.....I'm afraid your sister is dead. She probably passed away during the night."

"Oh no.....She was only a kid."

He still thought of all his children as kids, even Zane who rarely cried. He hugged Tirsia until her felt her tense shoulders relax a little.

"Go and tell Zane..... And be nice. Your brother might not show it, but he loved Tonya as much as you did. Don't come outside until I've had a chance to talk to your mum."

"Alright dad."

There were four really old coats on the hooks in the hallway. Greatcoats he believed they'd been called, the ancient garments had come with the house. Tyler wore one and carried another for his wife. He found her on the garden bench he'd recently cleaned and placed in front of what would one day be their potato garden. He felt relieved to see her properly dressed and wearing boots. After draping the coat over her shoulders, Tyler sat next to her, but didn't touch her.

"There's a church in the village, with a small graveyard outside." He said. "We can bury Tonya there.....Find a pretty spot for her."

"No."

"She needs to be buried in holy ground."

"No, she's going to be buried here, where we she was loved. Right under the old apple tree. I'm sure God won't mind..... Then this place is ours, no more moving. Once we've buried Tonya here, we stay put."

"I love the place and so do the kids."

Liza let him hug her and he knew the worst wasn't over, but they'd get through it as a family. His wife opened her hand, showing him two empty morphine ampules.

"I'm sorry..... She was in so much pain."

"You did the right thing..... She was too young to suffer."

Matthew Newman held the microphone, not really knowing what to expect. The speaker on the comms unit was notoriously bad. He just hoped that if it was Deb on the other end of the call, he'd be able to recognise her voice.

"Do I just talk Bren ? Is it set up and ready ?"

She had been sat on the edge of the bed they shared, but she'd gone.

"Hello, this is Matt Newman."

"I really didn't believe them.....To hear your voice again."

Far too quiet, with a little distortion, though there was no mistaking her voice. It changed everything and part of his mind was already wondering if he should tell her about Bren.

"We're flavour of the month for a while." He said. "It won't last of course.....How are you ? Why are you in Filey of all places ?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but I saw the Fifth West sign on the road and had to come here. Iris wasn't happy, especially when I put the rickshaw up on two wheels."

It was wonderful to hear her chuckling.

"What were you doing in a rickshaw ?" He asked.

"I'll tell you everything, if there's time. How long do you think we have ?"

"We'll just talk until the connection dies." He said. "I love you Deb, but I need to tell you something. I'm not proud of it, but I....."

"No, don't tell me." She yelled. "I've done some terrible things too, had to.....We're all having to do dreadful things to survive and stay sane. It doesn't matter, any of it.... I love you too. Now let me tell you about the rickshaw."

"Stay in Filey and when I'm finished here, I'll come and find you." He said.

"You're going to cross the globe during an alien invasion?"

"Yes..... You know me. If I say I'll do it, I will."

"I believe you."

"Right..... Now tell me why you were in a rickshaw in Filey?"

"First I need to tell you about Iris....."

They talked for about half an hour. A conversation about nonsense until the connection died.

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