

Ishmael

Chapter 9 – Royal Darwin Hospital

“Ish muttered in his sleep, he’d been doing that a lot lately. The clock said three thirty two in the morning and she’d only managed to get about an hour’s sleep. Pandora ran her hand gently over Ish’s face, brushing a few unruly locks of hair out of his eyes.”



Brenda Grundy knew the pain killers were essential, but the last few days at the Royal Darwin Hospital had seemed like a dream. Lots of friendly nurses and doctors, all treating her like some kind of hero. She couldn’t remember their names, just a blur of smiling faces.

“You were lucky; we don’t need to operate on your back.”

“The pain killers are the strongest we have, you will sleep a lot.”

“Matthew Newman called before the phone lines went down.”

“Tomorrow the physio team will talk to you.”

“You have to eat Brenda, or you won’t get better.”

She was hungry, but sleeping eighteen hours a day meant she was missing meals. Bren seemed to be either asleep or in pain and she preferred sleep. Somewhere at the back of her permanently anaesthetised brain, she was worried about the phones going out and not being able to talk to Matt.

“He’s my commander, I should make a report.” She’d told a nurse.

The nurse had smiled, they all seemed to smile twenty four seven. One mentioned cutting back on her pain killers to allow her to function more normally.

“I’ll be fine after the surgery to fix my back.”

“We don’t need to operate Brenda.”

A doctor who seemed to have been a nurse a few moments before. The staff were nice, but they did seem to be trying to confuse her.

“Stop changing who you are.” She snapped.

“I’m taking you off the pain killers tonight; we’ll see how well you sleep without them.”

Second night, third night, it might have been her fourth night in the hospital. Bren wasn’t sure, but despite a dull ache in her back and no painkillers, she did sleep. Alarm noises had fitted themselves neatly into a strange dream she was having about her mum turning into an alien. Even the smell of burning fitted right into the dream, as she rolled over and carried on sleeping.

“Oh, stop that awful noise.....” She mumbled.

The need to empty her bladder finally woke her. Brenda only realised something was wrong after she’d carefully moved, sitting herself on the edge of the bed.

“Oh, what the fuck did they give me ?”

She had the headache from hell and nothing looked right. They’d put her in a two bed room and she had the room to herself. No lights, which seemed strange and the window blinds were still closed up for night. A little light was coming in through the gaps in the blinds, but not enough for her to see her way to the toilet.

“Nurse ! Nurse !”

Nothing and the button press beside the bed wasn’t working. Actually nothing was working, not just the lights. Bren stood up and the wound in her side hurt more than her back.

“Oh crap..... Nurse.....I could do with some help here.”

She was military, trained to cope with whatever life might throw her way. Light was the first thing she needed and the windows were only a few steps away. Bren walked slowly, noticing the stiffness in her back ease with every pace. It still hurt like hell, but not enough to stop her getting to the window.

"Fuck..... Am I still dreaming ? This can't be real."

Maybe revenge for killing the two scouts, or perhaps The Northern Territories were important to them for some reason. It was a nice looking day outside, perfect weather for her to see the destruction. Darwin was quite a small town.

"Home to just under a hundred and fifty thousand people. The hospital is second to none though."

The medical guy in the helicopter had told her during the flight there. He'd mentioned a massive rebuild after a cyclone destroyed a lot of buildings in the seventies. The new construction might have been designed to cope with future extreme weather, but the buildings could still burn. The view from the window showed her a lot of dead bodies on the street and a town on fire.

"You need to get dressed and assemble in the rear carpark."

The woman looked to be in her forties and was wearing a uniform that meant nothing to Bren. The woman leant out of the door and shouted at someone.

"I've found another who can walk..... Sending her to assembly point four."

Bren wasn't getting dressed; she wasn't even sure where her clothes were. Her bladder had gone beyond being bothersome and there was a definite chance of it deciding to empty itself over the floor.

"You're not dressing !" Snapped the woman.

"I've been on painkillers since I got here.....I have no idea where my things are and I have no idea how to get to assembly point four."

"Easy, out of this door and walk past the sign for urology. Turn right there, left past radiology....."

"Stop please, this is all gibberish to me. I'm Brenda Grundy, Senior Technician Brenda Grundy with the British army. Are you with the fire service ? I don't recognise the uniform."

"No, I'm with the State Emergency Service. We were diverted here from Kakadu National Park after rumours of a disaster reached a few of the smaller towns. We've a helicopter that can take a few survivors, though we haven't found many. You need to get dressed, I'll come back for you."

"I can't do anything at a rush..... Please don't go."

"Alright I'll wait for you..... Just be quick."

Bren made it into the toilet before her bladder gave up. There are many pleasures in life but at that moment, she thought emptying a full bladder had to be up there in the top five. Her clothes were in there too, cleaned and hanging on the back of the door.

"Have you found many more survivors ?" Asked Bren.

"No, you're the sixth out of a hospital with room for over three hundred."

"What about the other people they can't have just vanished ?"

"We have found bodies, a lot of bodies."

"How were they killed ?"

Bren heard the door to her room open. There was the clear sound of movement and the door opened again.

"Are you still there ?"

No answer, it seemed her new friend had deserted her after all. There would be signs pointing to the assembly point though, hospitals were good at signs to important places. Dressing wasn't fun and

her body refused to hurry. By some miracle her belt was left with her clothes and the gun in its holster attached to it. Bren felt instantly better when she found the clip in her gun was full.

"I'm ready to go now !"

No answer, she hadn't really expected one. Her room was empty, no sign of the woman from the State Emergency Service. Thirst was now an issue, she couldn't remember drinking anything since the previous afternoon. She drank half the contents of the water jug on her bedside table. Brenda Grundy now felt ready for anything.

"Fuck..... I never did find out her name."

The woman was just outside her door, lying on the floor. Whatever had ripped out her throat must have done it quickly and expertly, there had been almost no noise. Bren risked the pain, bending down to close the dead woman's eyes. It seemed something was still there, still tidying up loose ends. Something smaller than a Ripley, judging by the way it had moved through her hospital room with stealth.

'Rear car park emergency assembly points,' said a sign with green lettering.

Bren didn't care about revenge, she held the gun in her hand in case she needed it for defence. Ideally she wanted to get on the helicopter and out of Darwin without seeing the alien that had killed her would be saviour.

"Damn, I knew I should have stayed with Matt." She mumbled.

There were a few broken windows, even the occasional door open to the outside. The light was still dark in places and she had a pretty good idea the alien would have the same camouflage skin as the Ripleys. Bren walked past the double doors for Urology, still following the signs for the rear car park. Supposing there was more than one alien inside the hospital ? There was a noise behind her. Bren spun around, just in time to see the breeze from an open window blow an empty water bottle onto the floor.

"Crap, get a grip girl." She muttered at herself.

She felt a little sweaty; her heart was hammering away and all because of the wind and an empty bottle. Her finger was actually beginning to pull back on the trigger. Bren took a few deep breaths and carried on, past the corridor with a sign for radiology at the end. If her memory and the signs were right, the exit doors for the assembly point were straight on the way she was going. The creature had chosen a good spot to wait in ambush; there was an area of deep shadow to the right of the corridor.

Experience saved Brenda, the weird visual effect had meaning. Instead of hiding the alien, its camouflage effect had caused her to see it. The size of a toddler, it had flattened itself against the wall, waiting to pounce. As she moved forward it turned towards her. If she stood still for a few seconds it went back to hugging the wall and ignoring her. Six identically arms, or legs, depending on how you viewed them, all ending in sharp claws. A head, or at least a round part of its body where a head would normally be. No eyes or ears though, just the same grey covering of skin as a Ripley. Bren held her gun up, aiming at what was probably its head.

"Can you hear me ?" She whispered.

Twenty feet away, maybe thirty and it reacted, turning towards her for a few seconds. Experiments were fine, but she needed to get past it, the helicopter was unlikely to wait on the ground for long. Bren took three careful steps forward, letting her foot hit the floor hard after the third step. Something opened on the front of its head, actually several things. The skin pulled back in a few places, revealing eyes, or maybe ears.

Brenda still needed to be closer to be certain of hitting the thing in the shadows. Slowly and with quite a few stops she advanced to within ten feet of the alien. She had a plan even if it was a bad one. As she looked at the patiently waiting creature, she wondered if it was a living thing at all. Even a domestic cat would have come to take a look at her by now, even if just out of simple curiosity.

"Are you real or a robot?" She yelled.

Brenda walked slowly but noisily, slamming her foot down with every step. Its front two arms changed, thickening, beginning to change into something. What mostly interested her were the six eyes opening wide at the front of its head. Definitely eyes, there was a slight glint from a lens where two of them caught the light. Brenda fired three times, straight at one of the open eyes.

"Bastard." She yelled.

It was dead, she knew by the way it fell off the wall. There was a loud thump as it hit the ground. Nothing with even a little bit of life left in it would have fallen into a heap like that. Bren was thinking about the best way to drag it outside, when the body began to change, to liquefy. Within a few seconds the dangerous alien had become just a pool of liquid on the floor.

"We killed a few small ones, they all do that. The bigger ones are a lot harder to kill."

Brenda spun around a little earlier, when her nerves had been a mess, she might have shot him. Killing the alien had relaxed her, she didn't even raise her gun in his direction. She recognised the uniform he was wearing.

"You must be with the State Emergency Service."

"Sounds fancy, but I'm just a volunteer who normally just does weekends. So you're a Brit huh? I heard there were a few of you about..... We were at Kakadu until all this shit happened."

"I was there and we did kill a big one. I'm Brenda by the way."

"Liam..... I came to find Loris, she's our senior office. Have you seen her?"

"Ginger hair, a bit shorter than me?"

"That's her."

"Sorry Liam she didn't make it. I think one of these things got her."

He was holding a rifle in that awkward way, which told her he wasn't used to holding it. She had him down as an office worker with a need to serve his country at weekends.

"I should check..... someone will ask." He said.

"Then lie Liam, I'll back you up. Her body is a long way back there, in the dark. Trust me, she's dead, I checked."

"Alright.....Anyway, the pilot wants to get away from here."

No following the signs, he went straight out of the nearest doorway, with her following close behind.

"Our base is just a few miles south of town." Said Liam. "These things attacked us first. We brought our wounded here to be treated..... And found all this going on."

"Where will we go now?" She asked. "Are there other hospitals?"

"Our pilot normally flies an air ambulance, he knows a few places we can take the wounded. Not hospitals, but there are a few medical centres to the west."

He wasn't that aware of his surroundings, she was amazed Liam had survived. Sometimes it happened though, almost as if a guardian angel looked after idiots in battle. They went through a large car park, where she fired at two of the aliens Liam hadn't even noticed.

"Stay alert." She told him.

"..... It's just that..... I came to school in Darwin, everyone did.... It doesn't feel real."

"Make it feel real, or one of those things will rip your throat out."

The gunfire was intermittent, coming from the direction Liam was taking her. The helicopter was larger than she'd expected and covered in medical service logos. Bren was beginning to think the State Emergency Service had borrowed it and the pilot.

"Come on..... Run." Shouted Liam.

One man in uniform was firing an assault rifle at something on the hospital roof. There had been a fight in front of the helicopter, a woman was lying face down on the ground, her back covered in blood. Pointless of course, but Bren checked her pulse just to prove to Liam that she hadn't simply assumed Loris had been dead.

"No pulse, she's gone." Said Bren.

"Get us into the air..... Now." Liam shouted at the pilot.

At least twelve wounded people in the helicopter, a mix of injured military and patients from the hospital. No one seemed to have escaped injury. Even a nurse looking after a man on a stretcher, had a bandage on her lower arm. Judging by where she knew the ocean to be, the pilot took them north, always keeping low and fast.

"What happened to Loris ?" The pilot asked.

"One of the small ones got her." Said Liam.

"Ripped her throat out, I saw it happen." Added Bren.

Just before the ocean the pilot turned due west, crossing over what looked like a wide estuary.

"There's a clinic at Dundee Downs." Said the Pilot. "Small place in the middle of nowhere. Hopefully the aliens won't think it's worth attacking."

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MacLaren had muttered quite a few times about risking her neck to save a code book no one was interested in. The attitude didn't worry Pamela Rath; it was just MacLaren being her usual self. It hadn't been a waste of time; the codes had enabled her to convince the SatLink network that she really was from Base Albion, even if she was using the Mordor One uplink.

"All the effort.....Haven't most of the satellites been fried ?"

Richard had muttered at her while they were dressing that morning.

"They're designed like PopNet." She'd replied. "Like a huge octopus with an almost limitless number of tentacles. A few tentacles die, it just moves everything round, routing through what's left."

"Fine, just give me a shout if you manage to get hold of an overnight from home."

Pam ran the decryption keys over the data bursts she'd just talked the SatLink into giving her and sighed. There'd be no going through the old 'good news-bad news' routine with Richard, everything was bad news. They were still using personal communicators, as the internal comms system was still playing hard to get. Richard answered her right away, he obviously wasn't that busy.

"Hi Pam, did you get the overnights ?"

"Just one and a special packet for your eyes only."

"Did you open it ?"

"Of course I did. Best if you come here, I'm at the main comms terminal."

"On my way."

In Albion there had been just about been room to swing a cat around, as long as it was a small cat. Mordor One was different, people had been known to get lost. They were getting better at finding their way around, but it was still a relief when Richard arrived, throwing himself down onto a comfy chair.

"What's the news from home Pam ? I'm assuming it's bad."

"It's the last overnight, but I'll come back to that. It appears the Mars colonies have been silent for weeks, but the news was kept from the public." She said.

"I can understand that, no one wants to hear yet more bad news. I expect there'll be no official announcement that Base Albion is no longer sending data bursts. What else Pam?"

It was how they'd been back at Albion, her reading out the juicy bits while he listened. At first she'd been slightly insulted, but now she felt it showed he trusted her. She only ever skipped over the bureaucratic crap, never anything he had to know.

"Lots of the usual crap, all bad....Do you just want the highlights?" She asked.

"Give me the low crap version."

"They received news that both UniCon Moon Bases have been attacked, all personnel assumed to be dead. I'm assuming UniConsortium gave them that info, but they don't say. Interestingly they're now advising us to join the Chinese in their bunker."

"Hmmm.... Obviously sent before the Mao Zedong Base went quiet." Said Richard.

"The worst part would have been a death sentence if we hadn't come here Richard, there'll be no more supply shuttles, no more food."

"I prefer to think of it as a come home or starve notice Pam, they know we have Billy."

Sylvie walked into the room and stood near the door. It was happening so often that Pam thought it was deliberate. The students were organising in a minor way, trying to find out what was being kept from them. A small rebellion for now, though it still made Pam nervous about the future.

"Did you want anything Sylvie?" Asked Richard.

"Is there news from home?"

"I'll tell everyone about it before dinner in the lounge. Now please leave.... No, stand outside the door and stop anyone else from entering."

"I'm not..... Alright."

Use them against one another, Pam quite liked that. Richard was actually chuckling.

"Our very own Juliet becomes a spy for the rebellion." He said.

"You should take it seriously....They're a bunch of kids a long way from home, they're bound to begin to start overthinking everything. I trust the military brats like Gene, but the others.....You should take it all more seriously."

"Are you suggesting I take a vote on whether to go home or stay here? My guess is that the majority will want to stay here, where they're well fed and comfortable. Besides, you know how I feel about voting. We're in command, we'll decide if we use Billy to get home."

There was a shuttle belonging to Mordor One, a sleeker and more comfortable craft. So far it had refused to talk them and for all they knew it might have been programmed to land in Siberia. They trusted Billy, so the large, sleek and spacious shuttle remained a final option if everything else failed.

"I'm not suggesting giving them a vote Richard. Talk to any of them for more than five minutes and it'll terrify you.... I mean it, kids and their angst. We need to talk to them though, make them feel in the loop. Mostly it's like soldiers being told to paint rocks... We need to keep them busy."

Pam doubted if the students wanted to go home. There had been a few mutterings about missing the families, but the surviving satellites were showing them an Earth that was going gradually more dark, more silent. Everyone liked the comfort and security of Mordor One. There had been a bad day when MacLaren had decided to investigate a bad smell in hydroponics. Finding two badly decomposed bodies jammed behind the heating pipes had been a dreadful time. That was quickly forgotten though, everyone seemed happy to be there.

“Good idea.” Said Richard. “We’ll ask them for ideas on keeping occupied. Give them ownership of a few projects and they’ll settle down.”

“We need to work out who we can rely on Richard, probably the military intake. Gradually and carefully we need to make sure they’re the only people carrying weapons.”

“Really Pam..... You want to go that far ?”

She kissed him on the cheek, the warm tingle telling her she was becoming far too fond of him. As the chances of returning home to her husband seemed slim, she wasn’t going to beat herself up about falling in love with Richard Martucci.

“I think the world of you Richard, but when it comes to reading people.....Yes, we do need to go that far.”

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After several days studying the alien machines in and around Stourbridge, the Fifth West science team were getting ready to leave the area. Pandora Gray was happy about that, it meant they could leave Inka Malovic and her kids at a refugee camp near Hereford. It wasn’t that the kids were rude or anything like that, she felt uneasy about the closeness Inka had quickly developed with Ish.

“I don’t know, old souls or something. I believe there are people we’re destined to meet.”

Was the hippy nonsense he’d told her when she’d mentioned it. Actually it wasn’t nonsense, she believed it too. It was just that Inka had crossed a line by invading her neighbour’s house.

“Stop finding reasons to hate her you idiot.” She muttered.

Ish muttered in his sleep, he’d been doing that a lot lately. The clock said three thirty two in the morning and she’d only managed to get about an hour’s sleep. Pandora ran her hand gently over Ish’s face, brushing a few unruly locks of hair out of his eyes.

“Sleep soundly Ish, I won’t let the demons hurt you.” She muttered.

No, Inka hadn’t crossed the line, she’d just done what mothers were doing all over the world, she was trying to keep her children fed. It was actually no worse than her mum taking a group of old ladies to the supermarket to panic buy a few cases of tinned beans.

“Altered priorities Biff.” Ish had said. “The whole world is full of people realising they need to alter their priorities.”

She actually liked Inka and her kids were nice. A littler feral maybe, but that was hardly surprising. The truth hurt Pandora. She was jealous of the closeness she had with Ish. For their entire lives only she’d been that close to him. Not even his mother had understood Ish. Only her, always only her.

“... They all have to die.....” Ish muttered in his sleep.

She kissed him on the cheek, which seemed to settle him.

“Sorry for being a jealous bitch Ish.” She said, softly.

Just as she felt finally ready for two or three hours of sleep, she felt Ish move. He was sat upright in bed, staring straight ahead of him. She touched his hand and there was no response.

“Are you alright Ish ?”

His skin was cold to her touch. Pandora didn’t want to turn on a light, she’d once heard that waking sleepwalkers was dangerous. Was he a sleepwalker though ? He was sat upright in bed, but he showed no sign of wanting to go anywhere.

“I didn’t intend to feel its mind Biff.”

“Who’s mind Ish ? You’re scaring me.”

Still stiff as a board, still the cold skin, yet he’d talked, the voice had been his.

“I was wrong Biff, JV was wrong..... There are a few of them here, it’s why the drones defended that building in the crater with such ferocity.”

She held him, hugged him, but there was no response. It felt as though her Ish, her lover, was somewhere else.

“Wake up Ish.”

She hit him, a hard slap across the face.

“I never realised how they’d be Biff..... It doesn’t want to be here.....Not like us, nothing like us. I can feel myself falling into.....”

“Wake up !”

She hit him twice, both times on the left cheek with a clenched fist. It was dark, she was sure the last blow had caught his eye. Pandora held him, hating herself for what she’d had to do.

“I’m so sorry Ish.”

He was back, she felt him respond to her hug, hugging her back. There was warmth in his flesh again. Fingers found hers, entwining round them, gripping hard in the darkness.

“Thank you Biff..... For a moment I thought that dreadful mind might devour me.”

“Are there many of them here ?” She asked.

“Only a few and only one here. It feels alone and.....No, I can’t even look at my memories without feeling it drawing me into a dark place. They don’t think like us.....Dreadful thoughts.”

“Try and sleep Ish.”

“No..... I mustn’t sleep again tonight..... I might never come back.”

She held him until the sun came up, which seemed to comfort him. All he’d kept saying was that he hadn’t intended to look into that dreadful alien mind. She showered with him, hoping to bring him back to her, anchor him in familiar actions.

“I’m glad we’re leaving this place today.” She said.

“No, I must call JV, we need more soldiers, lots more soldiers. We need to capture the alien, it’s the key to discovering why they’re here.”

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MacLaren liked the way Richard Martucci was growing into the role of leader. Officially he’d been commander of Base Albion for several years, but only as the guy who signed everything and made all the awkward decisions. He’d made no attempt to hide the fact that he was no good with people, leaving all the touchy feely stuff to Pam Rath.

“Now you know everything I know.” Said Richard. “There will be no more supply shuttles from Earth, we’re on our own. At the moment it would be a mistake to use Billy to go home, when there might not be a home to go back to.”

There was a lot of muttering and Sylvie looked angry. The sweet girl she’d rescued from the Nest seemed to be perpetually angry.

“We have enough food to last for years and the life support systems should work for centuries. And I think everyone is enjoying the comforts of Mordor One.” Said Pam.

There was a little laughter and a lot of smiles. It was nice to have showers that didn’t cut off while you were still grubby and air that didn’t smell a little funky all the time. MacLaren noticed that only one student had instantly demanded to go home. Everyone had people on Earth, but as with most situations, personal survival came first.

“We’re probably safe here; the aliens seem to have hit all the moon bases fairly quickly, before moving on.” Said Richard. “We have a secure little Eden here, but every Eden has its serpent. Ours will be boredom and depression, unless we find something to keep us occupied, something constructive. I’d like to hear your ideas ?”

No putting her hand up, Sylvie was up on her feet.

“Your role as leader is now redundant.” She yelled. “The first step must be for you to step down. We can then hold democratic elections to decide who leads us.”

Oh, too soon Sylvie, way too soon. Everyone was happy, Richard was seen as almost their saviour, the man who’d led them to the safety of Mordor One. Rebellions fed on bad times and disappointed people. Only one person at the back applauded.

“Thank you for that contribution Sylvie.” Said Richard. “I was really looking for new projects we can all do together. Some of you must have ideas ?”

Norma the student from Edinburgh had been getting under everyone’s feet, but she was awkward and gangly rather than stupid. MacLaren was pretty sure she knew what the student was going to suggest, she’d muttered at her about it one afternoon. Her hand went up and she coughed to get Richard’s attention.

“Yes Norma, what’s your suggestion ?”

“Everyone has heard that Mordor Two is twice the size of Mordor One. They might have all sorts of useful things there. I think we should go there and get inside.”

“Yay, let’s invade Mordor Two.” Someone shouted.

“Who knows, they might have cable TV.” Said Gene.

Everyone was laughing and chatting, apart from the one student who’d wanted to go home. It really did seem there was a universal rule that no matter how comfortable you might be; the grass was always greener in the moon base on the other side of the Pavlov crater. It was probably the closest she remembered Richard coming to taking a vote on anything.

“It seems that you all want to take a look at Mordor Two.” He said.

“It looks pretty unanimous to me.” Said MacLaren. “We’ll need to bring Billy inside and make sure he’s operating perfectly..... I can get onto that.”

Norma hadn’t finished though, she actually banged her hand on the wall to get everyone’s attention. “I’m reading interdisciplinary studies at Edinburgh.” She said. “I’ve already had a paper published on interfacing normally incompatible systems.....I’m almost certain I can get the Mordor One shuttle to trust us. If it trusts us, it can talk the Mordor Two AI into opening up their main airlock for us.”

“Sounds a great idea, their shuttle is twice the size of Billy.” Said MacLaren. “One thing though, I insist on being the pilot.”

There was a cheer, which actually quite surprised her. MacLaren really didn’t like students that much, but it seemed they liked her, or at least respected her skill as a pilot. Richard was looking at Pam, who was nodding like crazy.

“It seems our project will be entering Mordor Two and seeing what happened there. I’m appointing Gene as project leader and he can pick who he wants to go. I suspect he’ll have to use MacLaren as his pilot though, unless he wants a fight.”

Everyone looked happy, though MacLaren did notice Sylvie still looked angry. She was going to be trouble, Kitty MacLaren felt it in her bones.

“I’m appointing Norma as systems leader on the project.” Said Richard. “And sorry to bring us back to the mundane..... But the filters in hydroponics still aren’t self-cleaning properly. It’s a dirty job that needs doing. Can I have two volunteers ?”

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They were hardly Thelma and Louise. Iris Bouvard kept demanding that they tried to call her granddaughter, despite the fact that no phones were working, none at all. Deb Newman had only found out Mrs Bouvard’s first name, after pushing her across North Yorkshire in a hospital wheelchair for two days. Initially their food and water supply had been a box full of junk food from

the deserted hospital shop and a few bottles of water. Deb had become more sophisticated in her looting since then, taking a carrier bag full of tins from a shop in Dunnington. Tins of beans and burgers with ring pull tops as they were easy to open. It was amazing how good cold beans and burgers tasted after a day pushing someone's miserable grandmother for miles. Deb couldn't just abandon her though, she felt she had a clear duty of care for the grumpy old woman.

"I need to pee." Said Mrs Bouvard.

"Good timing for once Iris. I can see a stream up ahead. I'll help you wash and put on clean underwear."

"Less of the Iris, I'm Mrs Bouvard to you."

"Don't you dare say that you ungrateful..... I was nearly bitten by a dog last night, getting underwear for you out of that clothes shop. We're not related, there's no reason for me to put up with....."

Iris was crying and Deb felt guilty. Iris Bouvard admitted to being eighty six, a terrible age to be pushed across North Yorkshire by a stranger. She should have been at home, surrounded by doting great grandchildren. Especially as they had no plan, other than trying to get clear of the electrical dead zone.

"You promised not to leave me." Sobbed Iris.

"And I won't leave you..... Come on, I'll help you get to the edge of the water."

Deb helped Iris get down the river bank. Her leg wound had healed well; it was just the usual problems associated with age causing her problems. After a quick wash and a change of knickers, Iris actually rewarded her with a smile.

"Do you feel more comfortable now ?"

"Yes, thank you..... I'm thirsty now."

"Of course you are and then you'll need to pee again.....Come on, we need to keep moving."

Deb kissed the old lady on the forehead. In her own way she was becoming quite fond of Iris. There had been bodies on the road, but not that many. It could have been a pleasant walk through a beautiful part of Yorkshire, if it hadn't been for the fires. There always seemed to be a large fire somewhere not that far away. Serious fires without the sound of sirens, fires with no one trying to put them out. They were walking beside a long straight stretch of the A1079, when something about the abandoned truck caught her eye.

"Stay here, I'm going to see if this one will start."

"Oh, you've tried so many."

"I know, but we have to keep trying."

An open backed farm truck with dried mud hanging off the wheel arches and a smell of manure coming from the back. It looked more parked to come back to though, rather than dead and abandoned. The keys in the ignition caught her eye and the ZZ Top key ring hanging from them. Deb climbed in and grasped the ignition key.

"Keep your fingers crossed Iris." She shouted.

Deb Newman turned the key and the battery had power, the engine turned. It didn't so much roar into life, more of a steady thud as it ticked over. They had a vehicle though. The wheelchair went in the back and Iris managed to clamber into the passenger seat with surprising ease.

"Mrs Bouvard, have you been playing the old soldier with me ?"

"Iris dear, please call me Iris."

They'd driven a few miles before Deb thought it might be a good idea to decide on a general direction to head in. They'd just driven past a burning McDonalds, before a roundabout indicated

the A614 would take them roughly east or west. Deb pulled up and decided to leave the decision to Iris.

“Your choice, east towards Bridlington or west-ish for Pontefract ?”

“I’ve always liked Bridlington.”

“Bridlington it is.”

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