

Ishmael II : Pandora

Chapter 27 – A New Home

“The big clock with the count down to the launch wasn’t that big. An analogue dial on a very accurate device, which when it said midday.....Boom....The shuttles would be launched. The hands on the clock were quite small, but to her eyes, they appeared to be at least three feet long.”



Synchronicity had been hard at work since Ishmael and Pandora had been born, actually even before they’d been born. The two young people likely to save mankind, as long as they lived long enough and jumped through enough hoops. Others had been dragged along in their wake.

Deb Newman had once treated Ishmael for a bad nose bleed, when she’d worked as an A&E nurse at York Hospital. Ish was only a child then, the bleed could have been dangerous. Like flotsam caught up in a strong tide, Deb and her husband had been claimed by a vortex of synchronicity.

Inka Malovic’s brother Ivan had been on the same London to Belgrade plane as Ian, Ish’s father. They’d both been killed when the plane crashed while landing. Not part of any synchronicity, accidents did happen and major pieces were sometime removed from the board out of pure bad luck. Synchronicity had done its best and the fate of the entire Malovic family had become quantum entangled with that of Ishmael McGrath.

Liza Bates had talked to Pandora’s mother on numerous occasions. Judy Gray had been writing a piece for a Sunday magazine, on the changes being seen in black Britain. Liza’s opinions had been quite strong and the article had been widely read. Once again synchronicity dragged an entire family along in the wake of a major figure in the future of mankind. The fate of the entire Bates family became quantum entangled with that of Pandora Gray.

Luis and Jada Lopez had owned and run The Girona Guest House, in Torquay. Ish had spent a holiday with his parents there, when he’d been fifteen years old. A really good holiday, one of the best he could remember. He’d been troubled by strange images then, hallucinations as the therapist called them. For a while he’d found focus at the Girona. Why that was so important to synchronicity isn’t immediately obvious. For some reason the entire extended Lopez family became entangled and inextricably linked to Ish and Pandora.

Of course, synchronicity never stops and it still had to move people and events to benefit Pandora and the child she was yet to realise she carried. But that, as they say, is a story for another day.

Mateo Lopez had no idea that his fate was linked to that of others, few people do. If Synchronicity could ever have been said to give a sigh of relief, it was when Mateo and his family entered the farms to the west of The Fifth West Filey Campus. Not that Mateo was a major piece in the eternal game, but his children.....But that too is another story, for another day.

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Helen Lopez had no idea that they’d approached the campus from what was generally considered to be, the wrong direction. There was no reason they would know that. Mateo was in front, leading their one remaining horse, along a track they hoped might lead to somewhere, anywhere, even if it was just a ruined house to rest in for a while.

“No one waves back when I wave at them.” Said Tina.

“They don’t know us.” Said Jill.

They hadn't seen many people in the fields they'd walked past and those they had seen, didn't appear that friendly. No one had aimed a weapon at them yet, but they didn't seem to be welcome. When a child actually waved back at her daughter, Helen decided to risk approaching the group of women. About five women with at least a dozen grubby kids, though the kids looked happy and above all, friendly. An elderly lady sat next to a pile of turnips seemed to be the matriarch of the group. Helen began by apologising, the way everyone asking for directions always apologises.

"I'm sorry.....You might be able to point us the right way." Said Helen.

"Depends where you want to go?" Asked the woman beside the turnips.

"We're looking for the Fifth West Campus." Said Helen.

"They're taking us in one of the rockets." Added Tom.

"You might be too late, I'm not sure. Stay on this track and eventually you'll be seen by the guards. Tell them you want to see Francine about getting on a shuttle. Be firm, you have children. Don't let them fob you off with any bullshit."

"We won't, thank you." Said Mateo.

"Are you leaving on the shuttles?" Asked Tina.

"No honey, we were born here and we'll die here, just as the almighty intended."

"Thanks again." Said Helen.

It was the first people they'd come across with a religious reason for not leaving the planet. It was strange, but there was a good side. Tina appeared to have been shocked into silence for a while.

"After all those miles.....I hope we're not too late." Said Mateo.

The guards found them just as they saw the main campus buildings. Hostile until the name Francine turned them into being helpful. Two even promised Tina that they'd look after their horse, and the precious contents of the cart. They were taken away in a military APC, the first motorised vehicle Helen remembered being in for.....It had to be a hell of a long time. Someone was passing on their names and description by radio.

"They're talking about us mum." Said Tom.

"Don't worry, we're going to be alright."

One man was talking about final cut offs for shuttle places. It was impossible to tell if he was hearing good news or bad.

"Did we miss the shuttles?" She asked.

"No.....But you'll need to talk to Francine."

Down a ramp into an underground carpark and they were out of the APC. Friendly faces took them along corridor after corridor, it seemed to go on for miles. Eventually a woman was waiting for them outside of what might be a church. A cross was fixed above the doors.

"I'm Francine Lazan, the base commander. You almost missed the final close down for places on the shuttles, but no quite. You will need to be measured for the couches right away though."

"Thank you." Said Mateo. "It's mainly our children.....To give them a chance."

"I quite understand." Said Francine. "We will get you some refreshments, but first. There is someone I think you'll be glad to see. She's certainly looking forward to seeing you."

"Who is the almighty and why doesn't he want us to go?" Asked Tina.

Helen didn't know what to say, while Mateo just laughed.

"I think on this occasion, your parents outvote the almighty." Said Francine. "Come on child, someone is waiting to see you."

The room that had the look of a church appeared to be a hall of remembrance. Lots of pictures on the walls and vases full of flowers. Such quiet places of contemplation had sprung up all over after the invasion. A woman came forward to greet them, quite an elderly lady.

"Oh Jada.....I always knew you'd survive." Said Helen.

"Grandma." Yelled Tina.

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Andy Korenberg had noticed a walk around the hangars with Pamela Rath had become a habit. Not always first thing in the morning, sometimes quite late in the day. She had been the science officer on Base Albion after all, almost a kindred spirit. Nothing other than friendship, she was still sharing a bed with Richard Martucci. Her company had become something he looked forward to, it helped him focus. She knew about the perils of space travel, so he could be honest with her. No sugar coating was required when discussing the risks of transporting close to a million people to an unknown new world.

"Considering we're official ready to go." Said Pam. "I can see a lot of work going on."

He could see her point, every shuttle was still covered in gantries, which were all covered with busy people. No one had used the heavy loaders for a few days though, the main work was finished.

"I know what you mean, but we are at the fitting doorknobs stage." He said. "The finishing touches and making sure the coffee machines work."

"Oh yes, there must be coffee when we arrive." Said Pam.

"Don't worry, hydroponics have put a few hundred seedlings into long term storage."

"It feels real now Andy....We really are going to do this. There still seems to be so many busy people."

"If I was to say stop work, we're leaving now; the shuttles would still take off. We really are at that stage; the final adjustments have been made."

He was still finding it hard to believe himself. After all the years of hard work, they were ready to launch and leave Earth behind. Andy had a goodbye speech ready to read out just before the engines roared into life. The scavengers were going to get a special thank you. So many of them had died while finding chemical compounds they didn't understand. Many had children though and with luck, those children would grow up on a new world. He noticed Pam had a far away look on her face, as she looked at a hangar full of gleaming spacecraft. He knew the feeling he'd started eating breakfast where he could enjoy the view.

"Am I still one of the first to wake up?" Asked Pam. "When we get there, I mean."

"Yes, though that can still be changed if you want?"

"No, if there are problems I'd rather know."

No one could be totally certain that the AI would find a habitable planet. Plus, there was only so much information they could load into the AI's data banks. A planet that looked perfect, might have something toxic in the atmosphere, something beyond their knowledge and experience. It had been agreed quite early on that the AI would keep looking for a habitable planet forever if needs be, which really meant until the inevitable systems failure. Nothing was designed to last forever, though the shuttles were theoretically good for few hundred millennia.

"I still can't believe JV won't be going with us." He said. "Though Lianne has been added to those around the big table once we find a new home."

"My contract of employment was with the British Space Project." Said Pam. "Still, it will be nice to have a Verga among the decision makers. Can I give you a piece of advice, one that I won't get upset if you ignore?"

"I'm all ears Pam, suggest away."

"Add her current boyfriend to those woken up first. Trust me Andy, she'll appreciate having someone around who she can talk to."

"Already taken care of." He said.

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Lianne too, couldn't quite believe that her dad wasn't going to walk into the hangar and begin giving a few last-minute instructions. The hangars in Norway were smaller than those in Filey, but they still held an impressive number of shuttles. The alien bombing meant the automatic roofs were unlikely to work, so explosive charges had been fitted to get the job done. When they left the base, it would be with a bang, one hell of a bang.

"Which shuttle are we on?" Asked Nigel.

"The largest one, they're renaming it, The Jaroslav Verga."

She hadn't realised her father had allocated Nigel to one of the small shuttles, it seemed a fairly petty thing to do and JV was rarely petty. It had taken a bit of reorganisation, but Nigel was now going to spend the journey on the couch next to hers.

"Are we allowed to look inside?"

"We can go anywhere we want." She replied.

The shuttle had common rooms, two small kitchens, even a small room for reading and meditation. None of it for use on the flight, they'd all be on their couches, unconscious and totally unaware of the passage of time. The living areas were for when they arrived at mankind's new home. The majority of the refugees would need to remain on the shuttle fleet for quite some time, while prefabricated homes were built on the surface of the planet. There might even be dangerous predators to deal with. Had her father and Andy learned from the aliens? Not entirely, though the need for a fleet to remain in orbit, while the surface was made human friendly.....JV had realised the need, but observing the aliens had proven it.

"Wow, proper chairs." Said Nigel. "I thought it would all be very basic."

"Come on, let's see where we'll be sleeping for years."

Lianne was fortunate, she'd been able to get a couch next to Nigel's, while most were simply given the next available couch. No double couches, everyone was going to be sleeping on their own. There was little space, her head bumped the ceiling as she tried to get a better look.

"It's a bit cramped, but we won't be awake while we're here." She said.

"How do the couches keep us asleep for so long?" Asked Nigel.

Lianne knew, she'd read the design specifications and Andy's long theoretical work on the subject. Most who asked were simply told to think of it as an elaborate, but safe magic trick. They'd go to sleep and wake up near another home world, simple as that. She felt Nigel deserved to know what the couch was going to do with his body, but only if he wanted all the gory details. Luckily, he seemed to be having second thoughts.

"Actually..... Just tell me Lianne." He said. "Do they work?"

"Yes they do, incredibly well. There was research done with convicts that no one is particularly proud of. Work carried out by UniConsortium, some of it offworld on the moon. The results showed a staggeringly good result. Projecting those results forward shows we could be on the couches for several thousand years, and suffer no ill effects."

"They experimented on convicts?" Asked Nigel.

"Yes.....I did mention that no one is proud of that. The men used were well compensated."

"Did your father authorise the experiments?"

“Yes, he did.”

Nigel looked at her for a few moments, before holding her hand.

“Come on, show me everything. Is there a kitchen ?”

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Pandora Gray had Francine’s seat for the big day, sat at the base commander’s desk. Did that mean she was base commander once the shuttles had left ? She thought it probably did.

“Wow, the privileges of rank Ish. This chair is so nice, I bet it cost a small fortune.”

“I think it’s yours now.....Everything is now ours, all ours.”

Ish was putting on a psycho style voice, with a touch of Vincent Price. He looked happy and he could still walk, though not that far. He had a rash on his lower back now and the prognosis wasn’t good.

The campus AI didn’t give him long, a matter of months. Still, the damned computer had been wrong before. He came and sat beside her, shoving between her and the chair arm.

“Oi, you’re crushing me.” She yelled.

“Plenty of room.”

She had the old Ish back, even if only for a while. Their jobs had been done, for the most part they could now relax and have a little fun. A few farmers had remained behind, though they could probably fend for themselves. As Francine had pointed out.

“You’ll definitely be alright for turnips.”

Some livestock was still out there, doing whatever they usually did. Ish had wanted to make them all official pets, but there were still a few people to feed. Horace was still in the pens, even though Dora was sure she’d rather have been somewhere else. Her own side would think of her as a traitor, so they were left to feed her cabbage balls until they could come up with a sensible long-term plan for her. They did owe her a lot after all, every survivor of mankind owed her a lot.

“So, how many are remaining behind with us, Biff ?”

Dora had access to Francine’s log-ons now, such data was there, at her fingertips. Or rather, it should have been.

“Roughly.....Some weren’t flagged on the system, naughty Francine. Roughly a hundred and fifty, give or take. For some reason two theoretical physicists decided not to go.”

“Might be useful.” Said Ish.

The big clock with the count down to the launch wasn’t that big. An analogue dial on a very accurate device, which when it said midday.....Boom....The shuttles would be launched. The hands on the clock were quite small, but to her eyes, they appeared to be at least three feet long.

“Two minutes to go.” She said.

He snuggled down closer to her, while hugging her.

“Hold me tight Biff.....We should really be strapped in for this.”

“Idiot.”

She did hold onto him, they were warned the campus buildings might not be safe, if a shuttle exploded on take-off. The explosion itself, followed by toxic gases and the chance of gamma radiation. It wasn’t something to be taken lightly. According to the database just about everyone was out near the farms, over two miles away. Only the two of them were in the admin building....And the two theoretical physicists.

“I’m glad we decided to stay.” She said.

“You’re not just saying that ?”

“No, I mean it Ish.”

They had one camera feed showing the outside of the hangars. Everyone was supposed to be on the shuttles, no plans had been made about monitoring the take-off. As the clock hit midday, there was a huge explosion, Dora could feel the concrete floor vibrating. Of course, their one and only camera must have been hit by the shock wave.

"That'll be the hangar roof being blown away." She said.

It was all sounds and every sound was accompanied by the floor vibrating. It sounded as though one of the huge shuttles had launched, though it was all annoying guesswork. Ish got up out of the chair and moved towards the door.

"Come on Biff, we can't miss this. It really is a once in a lifetime moment."

"But your hip."

"I can sit down all next week, all month if I have to....Come on."

He took off at a run, the first time she'd seen him run since the infection had taken hold. Together they ran out of the building and towards the outside of the hangars.

"Fuck.....Look at that !" Yelled Ish.

Dora had that moment, when her senses refused to accept what her eyes were seeing. The large shuttles looked too huge, too enormous to be hurtling up into the sky. The noise of so many shuttles taking off together was astonishing. It was actually hurting her ears.

"Another one.....They keep coming." She shouted.

Of course they were all launching, that was the plan she'd sat and discussed every week for several years. To see it happen though, that was something different. A smaller shuttle this time, coming up out of the ground on top of what looked like a ball of white-hot flames. At first it rose slowly, before building up speed as it headed towards the clouds.

"Here.....Sit here and we can watch it all." She said.

A stone wall around the edge of an area of shrubs wasn't ideal for Ish's hip, but it was better than standing. It was like having the biggest and best firework display in the world, just for them to watch. Dora felt different and it wasn't just the euphoria of seeing mankind heading towards a new home. She was a few days late and she was never late, ever. Some girls she'd known at college had clockwork irregularity, but never her.

"When they go through the clouds.....Amazing." Shouted Ish.

"And the aliens kept their word.....No one is attacking them." She yelled.

It would be happening all over the globe, as every Fifth West Base launched its shuttles. There were still the tens of thousands in underground bunkers, whose fate was looking a little better since Vicky and her children had turned out to be allies. Close to a million were leaving Earth on the shuttles, more than enough to form a viable colony on a distant world. Even Andy's most pessimistic projections for systems failures predicted there were more than enough.

"I love you Ish." She shouted.

"I know." He yelled back.

She gave him a playful thump, before holding his hand and watching all the shuttles take-off. They sat there for hours, huddled together like a couple of kids. Watching the refugees from Earth, as they began the long journey to a new home.

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Steve Penboss had managed to arrange having a couch close to Daisy. Officially that was impossible, but everyone liked Daisy. Actually when he thought about it, she'd done far more to make it happen than he had. Not that he could see her now he was strapped to the couch with a mask over his face, but he knew she was there, and that was what mattered. They were in a long dormitory room, with

another dorm above them, and another above that.....etc. All fairly cramped and there were no windows. A definite risk of claustrophobia if they weren't all about to be put into hibernation for a very long time.

"We're next in the launch queue."

A disembodied voice from a speaker somewhere to his right. Steve was already strapped into the couch, with tubes plugged into various parts of his body. They had to be giving him some sort of mild sedative. He'd had dark thoughts about never waking up again. And even darker thoughts about being strapped to the couch, helpless, as flames engulfed him. All those thoughts were gone now and he felt completely.....Mellow.

"The mask will protect your eyes." He'd been told.

Protect from what though ? No one had been specific. So much relied on trust and Steve had never really been into trusting strangers. Then there were all the tubes.....

"You're just going to have to trust them you idiot." He muttered.

He was going to be asleep a few moments after launch, according to the briefing. He would dream for a while, but eventually even the dreams would stop. What then ? He'd know nothing until they woke him up at the other end. For someone not good at trusting anyone, it should have terrified him, but it didn't. Yep, they were dosing him with something and it had to be really good stuff.

"We're about to take-off." Said the disembodied voice.

Hadn't they missed the line about leaning forward and kissing your dick goodbye ? They were definitely upping the dose of whatever it was. He began to dream, he knew it was a dream, or some kind of drug induced hallucination. His eyes were covered, so he couldn't be seeing his desk, his DJ mixer and adverts shufflers at Bruce Grove Radio. The last he'd heard was that Bruce Grove was now a very untidy heap of rubble. He was taking a call from one of the regulars, a guy who liked to be called Ray Gunn. Yeah, he had really weird regular callers, but that was what radio phone-ins were all about. The weirder the crazy guy on the phone the better.

"Look Steve, it's bloody obvious.....When you think about it."

"What is Ray....Enlighten us ?"

"There are no aliens. It's Russia, it's always Russia. They blew up the undersea cables in twenty forty. Now they're bringing down passenger jets and killing tourists in Australia."

"So Ray, you're telling us it's definitely the Russians ?"

"Of course it fucking is. Only a crazy person would think it's aliens."

He'd had that conversation so many times, with so many different callers. As he felt the kick in his back from the main thrusters, he went from dreaming and into a deep, prolonged and drug induced sleep.

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The Bates family were having a family barbecue, their first cooking outdoors in quite a while. Tyler had talked to Liza and it had been decided that the circumstances deserved something a bit special. Tirsia had asked about bringing a boy for lunch. Their daughter was nineteen now, maybe twenty, they'd become quite bad at keeping track of the years. It was natural that she'd be interest in boys, young men really. It was just that there weren't many anywhere near them and Tirsia didn't seem keen on the few there were. His daughter was pretty and choosy.

"Don't trust my mum's fruit punch Sami." Said Tirsia. "Two glasses and we'll have to carry you home."

"Hey....You're not too big to go over my knee young lady." Said Liza.

Sami wasn't related to the people in the north, he just lived with them. There was a lot of that going on since the war. Not that the war seemed to be going on in Kent, there had been no attacks for quite some time, hence the outdoor barbecue.

"I'm doing a medium cooked deer steak for everyone." Said Tyler.

"But I want mine rare." Said Zane.

"I don't care, everyone is getting it the same...All medium done."

Liza gave him a look, but Tyler had learned it was best to be firm. Put up with their food foibles and he'd still be cooking at dusk. He'd been there.

"Sounds good to me." Said Sami.

His daughter had called Sami a bit of a dweeb, even a dork once. Dork or not, she now seemed quite keen on the boy. Liza had accidentally found them snogging out near the house where the young couple had once lived. The house was now theirs; he'd even built a bunker in the basement. Perfect as a home for Tirsa and a husband.....Though he was probably thinking far, too far, ahead.

"We haven't seen aliens for so long.....I was hoping they'd gone." Said Tirsa, while looking up.

"They're ours.....The shuttles everyone talked about." Said Tyler.

They'd had no contact with Fifth West since Judy Gray had left, they'd been told to avoid using any kind of radio communications. They'd heard about the vast fleet of shuttles though and the aliens didn't use any craft that looked like those disappearing into the clouds. Huge silver metal monsters, with bright, hot trails being left in their wake.

"Yes, the aliens don't use rockets." Said Zane.

"We decided not to go.....The family I live with decided to stay here." Said Sami.

"We'll be fine, you'll see." Said Tyler.

Somewhere deep inside he had a worry about making the wrong decision. His family could have been up there, in one of the metal beasts leaving Earth. There would be fights with the aliens once they came out of their bunkers. But there were now Vicky's people to help in the fight.

"Yes.....We'll be fine." He said.

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Kitty MacLaren had been picked for the initial group to be woken up. As far as she could tell, it was because she could fly almost anything and that might make her useful. She wasn't sure, no one had officially told her why she was feeling dreadful and wanting to throw up, while those around her were still asleep.

"Take it slowly, you've been asleep for a long time." Said Deb Newman.

Kitty had wanted to say it was nice to see a friendly face, but just a lot of random noise came out of her throat.

"Crap Deb.....I feel rough." She finally managed.

"Drink this slowly and only this for a few hours. You'll have a raging thirst, but don't give into it, or you'll end up vomiting it up again. Vomit in zero G goes a long way and can be very unpleasant, trust me."

Deb handed her a zero G drink bag, which of course, she recognised from her days as a lunar shuttle pilot. She was also given a vomit bag, with a resealable top.

"Just in case.....You won't have any solids to come up, but liquids can be just as unpleasant. You'll probably get a little brain fog too. Just wait for it to pass....It will pass."

"Christ....I feel rough." Said Kitty. "How long were we all asleep?"

Deb gave her a shot of something, which hoped might make her feel less nauseous.

“HmMMM I’m not sure if I’m supposed to say, but no one seems to know. My nursing team were the first awake and we hear things. The fleet ran through an electromagnetic event of some kind, no one knows exactly what it was. Every shuttle is now showing a different elapsed time for the mission.”

“I don’t mind a rough idea.”

“Somewhere between two thousand years and a quarter of a million.”

“Fuck.”

“Don’t yell about it MacLaren, or you’ll get me in trouble. Andy wants to be the one to let everyone know what’s going on.”

“Did all the shuttles make it ?”

“See Andy.”

“Oh, Deb.”

“Talk to Andy.”

On Sci-Fi films they had artificial gravity on interstellar craft, or magnetic boots that clung to the floor. Fifth West had gone for something far less high tech, but it had worked well on the regular civilian shuttles to the colonies on Mars. Ropes twined around each other to form flexible cords, which were attached to metal rings on the wall. Kitty was an old hand at zero G, she could get to places quickly by pulling herself along on the ropes. She’d reached a four-way junction, when the brain fog arrived. It was accompanied by nausea and the headache from hell.

“Wow, worse than the morning after that night in.....”

She remembered the hangover and throwing up, but not the city where it had happened. Her memory still held who she was and where she was, though not why she was there, or who she was on her way to see.

“It will pass.....She said it will pass.”

Kitty put the vomit bag over her face and her stomach felt as though it was trying to vomit, though mercifully nothing came out of her. She took a long pull on her drink and realised the water bag was half empty. That mattered, it was important, she just couldn’t remember why.

“I am Kitty MacLaren....I am on a Fifth West Shuttle.” She muttered.

Her birthday came next and the address of the flat in London, her last proper home before the invasion had turned everything upside down. The brain fog was lifting when she saw the two technicians coming towards her. It occurred to her that for every decision maker there had to be two or three technicians. They’d launch drones and monitor sensors, to provide the decision makers with accurate information. They weren’t zero G experts, one of them had turned himself upside down.

“Hold on, stop fighting the ropes.” Said Kitty.

She helped him get upright and then showed him how to hold the ropes. Pulling yourself along in Zero G wasn’t natural, or in any way intuitive. Even some Mars shuttle pilots never mastered it.

“Slowing down causes the problem.” Said Kitty. “If you slow down fast, wrap your leg around the ropes. Rule one, never be afraid of looking stupid.”

“Thank you.”

“You guys are tech staff ?” She asked.

“Yes, we’re drone pilots.”

“Did all the shuttles make it ?”

“One was lost, one of the smaller shuttles.”

“Fuck.....Anyone on it we know ?”

A stupid question, though Kitty decided to blame it in the brain fog.

“Sorry, of course someone will know the people who were lost.” She said. “I haven’t quite woken up yet. Do we know who never made it ?”

“You’ll need to talk to Andy.”

Andy again, all paths towards information, seemed to lead to Andy Korenberg. Officially it was the control room, though it had been referred to as the bridge, right through construction. The tricky part was getting past the fire doors and onto the ropes at the other side. Nothing was designed perfectly, but the huge ships were only intended for one mission. Kitty managed to get through the doors in a reasonably safe way, though there were bound to be a few bumped knees and elbows. Andy was there, still holding a vomit bag over his face. Francine was leaning against a wall, while trying to hold a rope and fill a bag with yellow vomit, all at the same time. Kitty was beginning to be less self-conscience about not being at her personal best.

“I heard we lost a shuttle.” Said Kitty.

“One of the small shuttles from Southern Europe.” Said Pam Rath. “There’s a list of those who were lost on the terminal behind me.”

Kitty had no real idea why she was chosen as a decision maker and she had no real idea who else was on the list. Andy of course and Francine had to be on it, and Lianne now that she was the only surviving Verga. It was nice to see Pam Rath, but Louise Olvera the HR lady from Filey was there too. What the hell did HR know about the survival chances on an unknown world ? Kitty decided to sit for a while and listen, while nursing her headache. Andy nodded at her and moved his sick bag to one side.

“Have they checked all the couches yet, Louise ?” He asked.

“No, about a third so far. Only five dead have been found and all of them were on the caution list.” So that was why Louise was there, she was obviously the go to person for info on the passengers. One death was too many, though a few deaths on the journey had been expected. Being kept in a prolonged deep sleep wasn’t good for people....Crap....She still felt like shit.

“Do I have a link to Lianne yet ?” Yelled Andy.

“Two minutes.” Called a technician.

Art Singer came through the doors and managed to collide with the wall, before getting a good hold of the ropes. Yep, there were going to be a lot of bruises until people became a bit more used to moving about in zero G. Kitty could understand Art being there, he had been the science officer for the Filey Campus. He was quickly followed by Áslaug Kárason, who was a damned good doctor, but went on Kitty’s what the fuck list. Who the hell had put together the list of those to decide the fate of mankind ? Why no sign of Matt Newman, the official tough guy hero of the campus ?

“Alright, as nearly everyone is here, a quick recap.” Said Andy.

“We have the Norwegian shuttle; Lianne is linked in.” Someone yelled.

“Great can you hear me, Lianne ?” Asked Andy.

“Yes.”

“Alright, to recap.....”

Andy was using a paper pad full of handwritten notes, which was probably the best way to do it.

“About forty minutes ago, the AI woke the medical team, who then woke all of us. We are approaching a planet that looks amazingly like Earth and initial data is looking good. Can we have the images on the big screen ?”

“Sorry.....There it is.” Shouted a techie.

It was Earth on the screen, with continents and oceans. There were even the familiar icy poles at the north and south. The continents were too few for Earth though and the oceans looked larger. It was

a blue planet with hints of green. Kitty imagined it was morning down there in their new home, with creatures waking up to do, whatever they did down there.

"Is there a moon?" Asked Kitty.

"Two actually, though the AI doesn't predict that will cause rotational instability." Said Andy.

"It's beautiful." Said Pam.

"Is there intelligent life down there?" Asked Lianne.

"Two drones will be placing satellites in orbit, but we won't know for a while. There have been no radio transmissions though. By the time the satellites are giving us data, we will be committed to landing at least one shuttle."

"No, we have to wait for the satellite data." Said Art.

"May I!" Yelled Andy. "Continue with the recap?..... Thank you. What we know so far is that the atmosphere is acceptable, well within acceptable levels of Oxygen, Nitrogen and CO2. Argon is weirdly high, but that is only of academic interest. The sun it orbits is slightly younger than that of Earth, the UV emissions are slightly higher. Again though, within acceptable levels. The one negative is slightly higher gravity than we'd hoped. In a few generations their kids will all start to look a little....Stocky."

"There'll all be stocky, so no one will mind." Said Francine.

There was a lot of genuine laughter, the blue planet on the screen was perfect, better than Kitty had thought they'd find. If she'd woken up to see two stagnant oceans and a dying Sun, she'd still have wanted to land there. Mankind adapted and survived; it was what we did well. Some would say it was the only thing we did well. Matt Newman chose that moment to enter the control room, bumping his elbow on the doors as he arrived.

"Good, we're all here now." Said Andy.

"I've seen the data; we have to commit to landing." Said Matt.

So that was it, the strange mix of people who'd decide the fate on mankind. It seemed a weird choice, though as committees went, Kitty had seen worse. There'd be statues of them built within three or four generations and they'd all be thought of as saints. Kitty wasn't sure if she wanted to be a posthumous saint.

"I agree, we need to land and make it ours." She said.

"Not without the satellite data." Said Art. "Ishmael and Pandora would never have....."

"Ishmael and Pandora aren't here." Said Andy. "We've received no transmissions from the planet, none at all. True, the satellites will tell us if the signs of intelligent life are there, but even their data isn't certain to give a clear result. We're a little battered, with no idea how long the systems have been operating. Some key components might well be close to failure."

"We can't start our new world by invading an inhabited planet." Yelled Lianne. "No matter what we call it, or how we look at it....It's wrong."

"The human race must come first." Said Matt.

"We could wait for the satellite to send their data." Said Áslaug.

"Deciding to let the AI find another planet could be suicide for all of us." Said Andy. "When they tested putting people back on the couches again, few survived. I think we need to consider that."

"We did say that wouldn't be taken into account in reaching a decision...We agreed that years ago, Andy." Said Art.

"Agreeing something over a coffee in Filey, is different to being here and living through it." Said Francine.

Lianne went crazy, accusing Andy of betraying everything her father had stood for. Was he ? From what Kitty remembered, JV was likely to be telling everyone to prepare for landing. He might not have said fuck whoever might be down there, but it would have been there, in the subtext.

“I think I knew your father pretty well.” Yelled Andy. “He appointed me the head of this venture, so I’m calling a vote. I propose committing the fleet to orbiting and landing on the planet we’re heading towards.”

“It needs a name.” Said Kitty.

“It should be planet Jaroslav.” Said Lianne.

“No, there is only one name it can be.” Said Kitty. “Our new home should be planet Ishmael.”

“Why not Pandora ?” Asked Pam

There was a lot of muttering, but a consensus came out of it. No vote was called, though no one complained. It didn’t really surprise Kitty, though she’d have preferred her idea.

“So.....I will take a vote now for claiming Planet Pandora, as the new home for mankind.” Said Andy.

It wasn’t even close, even Art folded and votes for landing. Only Lianne was against, though she stopped arguing once the decision had been made.

“How long until we know if there’s intelligent life down there ?” Asked Kitty.

“A day, maybe two.” Said a techie. “But by then we’ll be in orbit.”

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~ The End ~

That’s it, the end of the story about Ishmael and Pandora. Book one is 524 pages and book two is 573 pages, or thereabouts. There was a slight temptation to carry on and write book three. I got hold of a big stick and chased the temptation until it went away. I hope you enjoyed the journey.

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