

## Ishmael II : Pandora

### Chapter 2 – We Need Horace

**“There was a small piece of extra tissue on his brainstem, a weird parting gift from the original Horace. The extra tiny piece of brain tissue gave Ish a few useful extra skills and senses.”**



The creature that had been Vicky understood parthenogenesis, breeding without fertilisation. After eating a large number of her fellow post graduate students, she now understood everything they had known. From advanced electronics to botany, all knowledge was useful if it helped her seven children to survive. Her kind were completely omnivorous, able to survive just as well on a diet of vegetation or flesh, though a mixed diet was preferable. Of course her kind only totalled eight individual so far, just her and her seven children. She was pregnant again, probably another multiple birth. What had triggered her to reproduce again ? Vicky had no idea and didn't really care. It just meant more children to be fed and looked after.

“Einer.....Take Fünfte and go north for a few miles. Don't get into any fights, that's important. See what's there and report back.”

“Yes Vicky.”

Her children used the word Vicky as though it meant mother. Einer had been her first born, a female who was the heaviest at birth and still the strongest of her children. Fünfte was small for a male, but clever, sometimes too damned clever. He'd keep his sister from getting into trouble.

Vicky had numbered her children roughly from one to seven in old Earth German. Not that imaginative, the language had been favoured by her grandmother on her father's side. For some reason the pain and shock of giving birth to seven children, had dragged out of her mind a language she barely understood. Her offspring had been numbered one to seven, or first to seventh. The pain had been quite bad, she still wasn't sure if they'd been named correctly. Her children were used to their names now though, there could be no changing them. The one's growing inside her would be named.....Actually she was still unsure about that.

“Vier..... Siebte.” She yelled. “Where are you ?”

Vicky stepped out of the Chinese shuttle her children had converted to suit their needs. It had armaments now and a few essential parts of the infrastructure had been armoured. It was unlikely anyone would attack them, she'd deliberately chosen a part of the world with little strategic value. If anyone did arrive with violent intent, they were ready.

“Yes Vicky.” Said Vier.

Vier and Siebte were another female and male team. Friends, though both were still sexually immature. Vicky knew that nature and their DNA wouldn't care if they were siblings. Eventually nature would take its course and childhood friendships were likely to become adult relationship. In her mind, Vicky had the pair down to be the first to expand their group by sexual reproduction.

“Go south as far as the sea. No fighting, though you may feed on animals. Report back to me what you find.”

“Yes Vicky.”

She was proud of her children as they straightened their long tails and ran into the surrounding jungle. There was a lot of mouse in their base DNA and quite a bit of human too. A lot of something

else their mutating DNA had given them, though Vicky wasn't sure exactly what. The mouse that had bitten her, had fed on the dead remains of Dimitri Minasyan, the man who'd developed the Human-Alien hybrid DNA. A few bites wasn't the same as consuming the entire brain though, there were gaps in her knowledge.

"I didn't call you Zwei. I don't need you at the moment." She said.

Her second born, a male who seemed totally devoted to her safety. She was used to him being her self-appointed guardian and knew he'd never let her send him away. It was a sort of game they played, her ordering and him ignoring. If she sent him on a lengthy errand, he'd just find one of his siblings to take his place. It seemed they'd reached the stage where someone always had to look after mum. Zwei grunted at her and stood his ground.

"Well.... If you're determined to hover about. Go and get me a coffee, I think there's some left."

Like most of the students from Base Albion, she'd become a bit addicted to coffee. Sadly, once the supply they had was gone, there was no way to replace it. Luckily none of her children liked the stuff, or were leaving it for her. Zwei had almost moved away, almost.

"Oh, this is ridiculous child.....I'm not going to run away."

"Yes Vicky, sorry."

His voice box wasn't as good at pronouncing English as the others. It took a bit of patience to understand him, but her second born was no fool. He knew his mother could be annoyingly independent. He went to get her coffee, but she knew he'd try to keep an eye on her while he got it.

"This is a good place." Vicky muttered.

Papua New Guinea, an area of undisturbed jungle about thirty miles west of Kikori. Plenty for her hungry kids to eat and no natural predators that could come close to hurting them. So far they hadn't encountered any human survivors or the new alien rulers of planet Earth.

"Coffee." Said Zwei

"Thank you, walk with me."

He liked that, she could see his walk had changed. Zwei came up on his toes when he was happy. She was Vicky, their mother and first of their kind. All of her kids would gladly die for her. No one was going to be their friends on the Earth as it now was. Vicky remembered who she had been though and who had caused all the trouble. Humans might not see her as a friend, but she had no intention of adding to their problems. Once her family had grown a little, she'd send some of them west towards Indonesia. Then she'd begin to get revenge for what the aliens had inflicted on the people of Earth.

"Soon you'll be able to tell me what aliens taste like Zwei." She said. "You'll like that, won't you?"

"Yes Vicky."

He had a way of dancing about on his toes when excited, like a powerful bally dancer with sharp claws and rows of dangerous looking teeth.

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It wasn't that far from Filey to Wykeham, but things were different since the full scale invasion. At one time the alien machines had kept clear of the Fifth West weapons. Now there were times, even if they were rare times, when they'd used incredibly powerful bombs against human resistance. In Filey human resistance meant the Fifth West Campus. They'd lost a team of six scientists to an alien bomb and the vehicles they'd been travelling in. Six didn't sound much in the grand scheme of things for a planet at war, but it was a third of their senior research and development team.

"If we keep close to their transmitter in Staxton, they probably won't bomb us." Said Ish.

The transmitter was huge, about the same height as the old BT Tower in London. The BT tower had gone of course, along with a good part of that area. The aliens rarely used their bombs against anything close to one of their important structures. Rarely, but it wasn't totally unknown. Everything seemed to be a throw of the dice since the alien armada had arrived.

"Then, from there.....We can keep close to their bunker near to the outskirts of Wykeham." Said Biff. Alien structures were everywhere, they had no idea what half of them did. There still weren't that many sightings of the aliens themselves, despite billions of them arriving on the armada of vessels that had arrived. JV though the aliens were patiently waiting in the huge craft still in orbit, for the atmosphere to be altered to suit them better. It was yet another point they often argued about. "That's crazy JV, the whole point of such a huge armada, was to bring every alien to their new world, to the earth. They'll all be down here now, keeping inside their bunkers. They're the ones modifying their Bio-Bots."

Another thing to argue about, another time there had been a serious row. Ish knew that JV needed him, but sometime a wounded ego could overrule a keen intellect. Ish knew that if he pushed JV too far, he might be thrown out of the Filey Campus.

"Can you feel them yet?" Asked Biff.

"Yes, I knew it Biff, I knew it." He replied. "There are about two dozen like Horace in the bunker, complete with a few children."

"You're certain about that?" Asked Art Singer.

They weren't officially considered as rogues or renegades by those who controlled the campus, but Art Singer had been going on every recent field trip with them. To JV they were obviously still a bit of a charity case, who needed constant supervision. Art was the base science office and to be fair, he didn't seem to enjoy the role of nursemaid.

"Yes Art, I'm certain." Said Ish. "This is the perfect opportunity to grab a replacement for Horace."

"We desperately need a new Horace." Added Biff.

No one questioned his ability, not really. There was a small piece of extra tissue on his brainstem, a weird parting gift from the original Horace. The extra tiny piece of brain tissue gave Ish a few useful extra skills and senses. The most useful so far, was the ability to sense aliens who were nearby. The alien structure was still about five kilometres away and it might be twenty aliens and not two dozen. They were there though, he was certain of it.

"The Bio-Bots will need warming up Biff." He said.

The armoured and screened APC was a bit limited for space. He'd need to lean across Biff to use the comms unit to talk to the truck following them. And as Biff was driving the heavy and hard to steer vehicles, it was easier to get her to pass on messages.

"Get the Bots ready for use." She told the soldiers in the truck. "Warm them up."

Warming up sounded like an old valve radio, but it accurately described what needed to be done before the converted Bio-Bots could be used. They been kept disconnected from their power supplies, after being converted to obeying orders from them, the Fifth West Science Team.

"They're getting a bit boisterous." Said one of the soldiers in the truck.

"That's normal." Biff told him. "Just don't get too close and get bitten."

Ish rolled his eyes at her, the soldiers in the truck did their best, but they'd never make good replacements for the six dead scientists.

"You can really control those.....Monsters?" Asked Art.

"They're not monsters." Snapped Ish. "I didn't expect that from you."

"Sorry."

“We’ve given them the equivalent of a huge computer virus.” Said Biff. “That will be loading up now, which accounts for them getting a bit lively.”

“Then there’s the Bio-Hack we carried out.” Said Ish. “They’ll be completely under our control, we can even see what they see. The best thing though is if they’re killed.....”

“No human soldier has died.” Added Biff. “We’ve seen enough of that.”

“And once we have a new Horace we now know how to keep him alive.” Said Ish.

One of the really fast alien saucers appeared in the sky nearby, far too close for comfort. At one time the small convoy would have stopped, but that made no difference. It was a game both sides understood that should have been called ‘how much are you willing to lose?’ Art was busy looking at the Fifth West Tech in the back of the APC.

“He’s turned on his targeting systems.” Said Art. “I’ll get a target lock on him.”

Some people called all the alien saucers she, but Art called just about everything he, including the Campus AI, which had a strange gender neutral voice. They waited, both of them aiming almost certain death at each other. The alien craft was probably talking to its controlling AI, informing it of any local structures in the likely blast zone. The humans in the APC just sat there, waiting to see if that morning was going to be their last. Eventually the alien saucer stopped scanning them and flew away to the west.

“Fuck, that’s about the fifth time I’ve been through that.” Said Art. “It never gets any easier.”

“You have to be like them.” Said Ish. “You need to not care which way it goes.”

Ish had never felt suicidal, not even slightly. He just couldn’t find the words to properly explain what he’d just said. Biff was giving him a weird look, while Art looked ready to call in the guys in white coats. Ish just shrugged at them.

“Not far now.... We’ll soon have a new Horace.” He said.

“What if it’s a female ?” Asked Art.

“We discussed that, we’ll call her Horace anyway.” Said Biff.

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Alejandro Lopez had wanted to pack a case and run, he’d just learned that agreeing with his wife and mother tended to mean a quiet life. At his car dealership in Torquay, he had been the boss, his word was law. For employees it was his way or the highway. At home, he was a different person.

“I’ve tried my best Daisy.” Said Steve. “Will you come with me ?”

There had been an argument between Steve and Jada, but Alejandro had tried to ignore it. The sounds outside were becoming harder to ignore though and the vibrations coming up through the floor.

“Alright Steve, we’re leaving.” Said Daisy.

Even that might not have made Alejandro decide to ignore his wife’s wishes, if it hadn’t been for his daughter, Maria. His daughter had a backpack intended for the few items she’d taken to the nursery, before the world had turned upside down. A toy really, with lots of cartoon characters on the back and sides. She was pushing things into the tiny back pack. Silly things, objects that made no sense. A large empty fruit bowl, a TV guide from before the war. It took him a few seconds to realise his daughter was silently panicking.

“Wait !” Shouted Alejandro “We’re going with you.”

“No we’re not.....I’m not going anywhere.” Yelled Jada.

“You are, even if I have to tie you up and carry you over my shoulder. Maria dear, stop packing rubbish and put a few tins in your pack.”

There were advantages to rarely shouting or demanding anything, everyone looked shocked. He'd suffer later of course, the ladies in his life would get their revenge. For the moment though, he had their full attention.

"Tracy, put a few essentials into a couple of cases on wheels. Essentials is the key thing.....Just remember if a case is too heavy, we might have to abandon it."

His wife nodded at him and was gone, running in the direction of the bedroom Steve had put them in. There was a problem though, one that just shouting at his family couldn't fix. He looked at Steve, who owed him nothing.

"Can you help me carry Jada?" He asked. "Sorry Steve, but I can't do it on my own. Tempting to leave her behind, but.....You know.... Family and all that."

"No one is carrying me." Said Jada.

His abuelita, his grandmother Valentina had suffered terribly from arthritis and it was disease that seemed to run through the female side of the Lopez family. Jada hadn't been too bad, until the invasion had exposed her to cold damp weather and sleeping in the open.

"Yeah, of course I'll help." Said Steve. "It sounds awful, but the best way is to carry her over your shoulder when we're trying to move quickly. I can take her when you get tired."

"No one is carrying me like a sack of coal." Yelled Jada.

Luis was glaring at him, as though another 'don't upset your mother' was on the way. Instead, his father got up and headed towards the stairs to the cellar.

"I'll help Maria pack a few tins." He said.

"Traitor." Yelled Jada, at her husband's retreating back.

Daisy seemed to realise his family had a bit of history, when it came to family arguments and minor feuds. Jada was a tough woman, she'd shot and killed the two looters who'd killed his abuelita, his grandmother. A few words from Daisy though, and his mother was beckoning him over.

"Alright, I'll be carried. But..... And I mean this. None of my friends must ever hear of this."

What the hell had Daisy said to her?! No way of knowing and there really wasn't time to try and find out. Most of his mother's friends were probably dead, so agreeing to her demand for privacy was easy.

"Word of you being carried will never leave my lips mum." He said.

It felt like it had taken hours, but it was probably less than ten minutes. Everyone was ready to leave, all pulling or carrying something with essential supplies inside it. Alejandro was proud to see his young daughter carrying a backpack full of tins. They'd all done as he'd asked, no case or bag looked too heavy to drag or carry while running.

"We should leave." Said Steve. "The sound of the diggers is getting too close for comfort."

The moment had come. He did it all in one motion, by grabbing his mother around the middle and lifting her up and over his shoulder. Jada grunted as the air was driven out of her lungs. She'd have trouble breathing, but there was no time to worry about that.

"Come on..... As fast as you can go." Said Daisy.

Steve went first, dragging a case on wheels. The idea was for them to swap over once carrying Jada had become too tiring. Looking at the size of the case, Alejandro thought he might as well carry his mum all day.

"Go on Maria, I'll follow you." He said.

He went last following them all out of the backdoor. There was a taste of burning in the air and fine dust that made him cough a few times. His family were moving quickly towards the path through the trees, even Maria with her rigid left knee was moving at quite a pace. For a second the noise of

digging machines became louder, as another of them appeared out of the small wood Steve was heading for. No panic, Steve stuck his left arm out like a guy on a pedal cycle. As a group they headed along the exposed edge of the hill.

“Can’t breathe.”

He heard Jada mutter, between grunts and throwing general abuse at him. There was no time to argue with her and definitely no time to put her down. Maria stumbled, but there was Daisy, making sure his daughter didn’t fall. Alejandro was becoming quite fond of Daisy, in a still slightly terrified kind of way. She was tough and even seemed to scare Steve sometimes.

“Stop struggling mum, I can’t put you down yet.”

The explosion behind him made Alejandro stop and quickly look back. One of the diggers had started demolishing Steve’s house and must have ruptured one of the precious natural gas tanks. The digger looked undamaged and was still making easy work of pulling the building apart. Much of the house was on fire though, the flames reaching up into the sky. He heard Jada mutter, but couldn’t make out the words.

“I bet you’re glad you came now mum.”

“Come on dad, we need to keep moving.” Said Maria.

Steve knew the area well, leading them through what looked to be an abandoned farm and onto what had been a tarmacked country lane. The invasion hadn’t started that long ago, but every crack in the road had been claimed by nature. Weeds, grasses, even a buddleia bush was trying to get a start. Soon it wouldn’t be recognisable as a road at all.

“We’ll stop here for a rest.” Yelled Steve.

It didn’t feel as though they’d come that far, or travelled for very long. All probably an illusion brought on by stress. When he looked back the smoke from Steve’s house seemed to be a very long way off, even the hill seemed quite distant. Jada was struggling, so he carefully lowered her onto her feet.

“We’re taking a break here.” He told her.

Oh that face, he was expecting her to slap him, or at least give him a verbal working over. Instead she went and muttered at Daisy, before both of them vanished behind a clump of high bushes. It seemed his mother’s desire to pee, outweighed her desire to tell him off.

“Are we heading for anywhere specific ?” He asked Steve. “Or just getting as far away from the aliens as quickly as we can.”

“A mixture of both I suppose.” Said Steve. “There is somewhere I know to the west, quite close to the River Dart. An old country estate that has seen better days. Not somewhere I’d normally suggest, but it’s miles from anywhere and probably too small for the aliens to bother knocking down.”

“We’re in an age of maybes and probablys.” Said Tracy.

“Best option I can think of to get us under cover tonight.” Said Steve.

“Where are we going ?” Asked Jada, as she appeared out of the trees.

“An old stately home mum, you’ll love it.”

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Bren Grundy quite liked travelling on the Eleanor. As long as the fuel lasted there was power for the lights, though they hadn’t used the aircon. Power for a screen in the bedroom and a player with a few decent movies on memory wafers. Add on a gas powered cooking range that would have had a few professional chefs swooning, and the Eleanor was a pretty good place to spend an apocalypse.

“I can see a lot of wreckage and driftwood.” Said Matt. “The storm must have been worse this far north. Not everyone got through it as well as we did.”

The storm had lasted just under a day when it had thrown the Eleanor around a bit. Two drinking glasses had been broken and a bottle of wine spilled. Otherwise, they had been very fortunate indeed. Judging by the debris floating by, those at sea closer to the coastline in front of them, hadn't done so well.

"Where do you think we are?" She asked.

"The GPS no longer works, but the owner of the Eleanor was sensible enough to own a few charts of the seas around here. And the compass still works of course. Going by the speed we entered the storm and the way it pushed us west.....I think we're looking at the coast of Bali."

The coast was still too far off to see properly, but just the name stirred up feelings. Bali, it hinted at romance and adventure. It was a part of the world she'd always wanted to visit, but never had.

"We have to go ashore for supplies Matt.....I've always wanted to see Bali."

Thankfully; he was grinning at her in a fellow conspirator kind of way, rather than a weird way.

"Me too....All those old movies leave their mark." He said. "According to the charts there's a road right along the south side of the island, with plenty of small towns and villages along it. Any one of them will probably have fuel and a few tins to add to the cupboard."

Tampons too, though she still felt awkward mentioning them to him. Early on in their trudge across the Northern Territories, she'd decided there was no such thing as too many tampons. She currently had an entire rucksack full, probably close to a critical mass of tampons. The factories that made them were gone though and from what she remembered from history lessons, the alternatives were fairly grim. So whenever she could, she'd keep adding to her large bag full of feminine hygiene products. Matt seemed to have a similar obsession to gather an unreasonably large supply of condoms.

"I can see something..... Looks like a small fishing boat." Said Matt.

It was her turn at the wheel. Bren guided them towards the vessel, which seemed to be dead in the water and drifting.

"Probably broke loose of its moorings during the storm." She said.

"Yeah, probably.....I can't see a pirate waiting offshore in the hope of luring a passing ship, but.....Take us around her Bren, nice and slow."

"I've nothing against healthy paranoia.....Nice and slow it is." She said.

A fishing boat is a fishing boat; there wasn't a lot to look at, as Bren coaxed the Eleanor into doing a complete circuit of the abandoned vessel. Bren would have suggested leaving the fishing boat to the mercy of the tides, if it hadn't been for the drums of fuel secured under a hefty looking net.

"They meant to go a long way." She said. "There are bound to be provisions we can use too."

She could see the blood covering an area of the deck, a lot of blood. She knew Matt could see it too. No bodies though, someone had cleared the deck after whatever had happened. Aliens tended not to leave bodies behind of course, they ate them.

"That's the same brand of fuel we loaded up with in Broome." Said Matt. "It would be nice to see what tins they've got. Something different to tinned beans and tinned pineapple would be nice."

She knew what he meant. She'd loved pineapple as a kid, but after eating it for days and days.....She was beginning to really hate it.

"Alright, I'll bring us alongside....The side without the blood." She said.

There was enough of an ocean swell to make getting close to the fishing boat a little difficult, maybe even dangerous. There was a bad bounce off the side of the vessel, which would have made the original owner of Eleanor cringe. Matt was hanging on tight to the rope securing a rubber ring though and didn't fall over.

“Alright, no harm done.....Give it another try Bren.” He yelled.

It was all so much easier against a fixed mooring in the still waters of a dock or a marina. Bren judged the swell as best she could and went alongside the fishing boat. It worked, the way it should have worked the first time. Matt had two rubber rings over the side, before the two vessels bumped with the next swell. She went down and helped him tie a few securing ropes.

“I don’t fancy doing that too often.” She said. “In the end it seemed to involve too much luck for my liking.”

“Worth it if they’ve a few tins of beef stew, or maybe tomato soup.”

“Oh yes, I’d kill for a few tins of tomato soup.”

“Stay here.....I’ll go over and make sure there are no nasty surprises.”

It wasn’t a gender thing that bothered her, not really. It was just that life onboard Eleanor was comfortable, but a bit dull. The fishing boat looked abandoned, but at least exploring it might be interesting.

“Why you Matt ? I fancy going over there to look around.”

His face twisted up a bit and she thought he might be about to pull rank on her. She had the argument ready, about how they’d both unilaterally resigned from the army.

“Fair enough Bren, we’ll toss for it, Ok ?”

“Fine, but we’ll use my coin.”

“Not your lucky quarter..... That is so unfair.”

No giving him a chance to change his mind, or dig a coin out of his own pocket. Bren used her thumb nail to spin the coin as she tossed it into the air.

“Call it.” She said.

“Shit.... Heads, the scruffy looking guy.”

The scruffy looking guy was probably dead. He’d been the last elected president of Australia. She caught the coin and flattened it against her forearm like a pro. The lucky quarter rarely let her down. It had come down tails, a picture of a Kookaburra bird.

“Brilliant, I’ll take the best shotgun with me.” She said.

“I’ll give you ten minutes before untying the Eleanor and heading for the coast.”

For a brief moment her mind refused to accept what her ears had heard. She turned to have a row, to find Matt grinning at her like a demented Cheshire cat. She thumped him in the chest and of course.... There had to be a long kiss. The sort of kiss that could have had them up on charges in the army.

“I’ll get my stuff.” She said.

The best shotgun out of the locker they used as a gun cupboard and a jacket with a few emergency items kept in its pockets. Matt was waiting for her with something almost priceless, a flashlight with working batteries in it.

“Be safe.” He said.

“I will.”

Getting over to the fishing boat wasn’t a dignified experience, the swell was still causing the vessels to jostle one another. Bren sort of tumbled onto the deck rather than climbed. An old back injury was hurting and to make things worse, there was the whole thing to do again on the return trip.

“Are you alright ?” Shouted Matt.

“Yes.....If we do this again, feel free to order me to let you do it.”

Any name on the side of the vessel had been removed, never a good omen. There was a small nameplate above the door to the wheelhouse though.



"We just boarded the Curlew out of Brisbane." She yelled.

"A long time away from Brisbane by the look of her.....Bren....."

"I know.....I am going to be careful."

Bren knew boats fairly well and besides, the door leading below decks was banging against its frame due to the constant swell. It was the other side of the pool of congealed blood, but she managed to avoid walking through the worst of it. Once she had the door fully open, it seemed sensible to introduce herself.

"Hello ! Anyone there ? I'm Brenda Grundy and I'm with the Australian Armed Forces."

Not really true any longer, but it was a fair and reasonable statement of her intent. She was there to help if she could and help herself to their supplies if she couldn't.

"Hello ! I'm coming down."

She had to walk backwards; all ships' stairs seemed to have been designed by someone who didn't care about health and safety. Her feet seemed to clang on every step.

"Hello ! I am armed, make yourself known."

Nothing, she was about ninety five percent certain she had the Curlew out of Brisbane to herself. She'd seen alien bots who could merge with the background, so she was still going to be very cautious. After all, something had to have killed and disposed of the crew. There was more blood outside the first room on her left, a bunkroom for the crew. Bren rattled the shotgun against the metal door, but got no response.

"Well Matt.....It looks like their tins and fuel are fair salvage." She muttered.

The kitchen on the Eleanor really was a kitchen. Bren though there'd be a galley on the Curlew, a small room where the crew made coffee and heated up tinned food on a hob. Hopefully though, there'd be a cupboard full of tins that didn't contain beans or pineapple. She heard a sound from the room on her right. Nothing loud, it could easily have been a stowaway rat doing its own search for food.

"Hello ! I am armed."

A good idea to pre-warn a potential threat ? Maybe not, but Bren still didn't want to risk killing a harmless looter. The rustling noise came again, louder than before. He was in the room, the man with the serious looking automatic aimed at her face. Bren already had the shotgun up, ready to use.

"Are you really with the military ?" He asked.

A strong Australian accent, probably.....If she'd been forced to guess. He was from Melbourne, definitely somewhere in that part of Southern Australia.

"Yes..... Put your gun down."

"You put yours down."

His hand was trembling; he didn't want things to end badly any more than she did.

"Is there anything left ?" He asked. "A proper government I mean, anyone still fighting back ?"

"Nothing really, just a few groups of people trying to survive. I'm Bren Grundy by the way, who are you ?"

He was still stubbornly aiming the gun at her face. He might not be a good shot, his hand was trembling quite a bit. Still, at that range....Her only option was to show him she was friendly.

"I'm Doug, Doug Barrett."

"How did you end up here Doug ?"

"I found the boat like this, but I never hurt anyone. I'd been doing a little trading for supplies near Port Moresby and..... It's a long story. After running from a few alien machines and finding a sailing

dinghy, I ended up on this damn fishing boat. The engine never did work that well and now it's totally fucked....I did it I think, trying to fix it."

How long had he been drifting and alone with a fucked engine ? She had no idea, but at least he'd lowered the gun. Bren lowered the shotgun and smiled at him.

"Can I offer you a lift somewhere....As a trade for a few tins of food, maybe some of the drums of fuel too ?"

"No problem, take everything. None of it really belongs to me anyway." Said Doug.

"We're all lotters now Doug, no shame in that."

"Where are you heading ?" He asked.

"You'll think we're crazy."

"I won't....I had this plan to set up a ring of boats far out to sea. The aliens couldn't get me there.....I'd run out of food and water, but at the time...It felt like a good plan. Now I just want to survive."

"That's pretty much our plan too. That and getting right across the globe to England, Filey in Yorkshire to be precise."

"Really ?"

"Yes."

"Jeezzz, that is crazy."

"I did tell you Doug, completely insane. So... What tinned food do you have ?"

"The usual beans and lots of tinned soups. Everything from vegetable soup to mulligatawny. The crew of this thing must have loved their soup."

"Easy to warm up in a tiny galley with just a hob. Come on Doug, you need to meet Matt. He will think you're the best person in the whole world."

"Why ?"

"He's fed up with eating beans and he loves soup."

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Deborah Newman, Deb to her friends. Knew she had a purpose, a reason for being at the Filey Fifth West Campus. After a career in nursing she had to wonder what that purpose was likely to be. The future seemed to belong to the warriors and the scientists. She helped run the campus clinic, though most of the people there seemed in good health. Most of the time it was everyday aches and pains in the waiting room, twice a pregnancy. Sometimes there was the horror of patching soldiers up after a fight with the aliens. Those occasions were truly dreadful, far worse than she'd ever experienced in a hospital accident and emergency department.

"I do have a part to play." She muttered. "Andy has mentioned it a few times and Ishmael."

"What was that dear ?" Asked Iris.

Iris Bouvard, eighty eight years old and still her companion on every adventure away from the campus. An odd sort of friendship, but they had travelled together for a long time, and fought together. Deb often thought the famous quotation should be rewritten for the alien invasion. The family that fights together, stays together.

"Nothing really Iris, just feeling a bit underemployed again."

"Francine says you've transformed the clinic."

Yes, but she'd arrived hoping to help save the world. Ishmael and Pandora were away, trying to capture another alien. One of the smart ones, the ones who'd built and controlled the millions of Bio-Bots. Andy Korenberg and his team were busy getting the evacuation fleet together. As for her and Iris ? They were on a section of pebbly beach to the north of Scarborough. A huge cruise ship

had run aground, a routine patrol had spotted it. No survivors though, or at least none had turned up banging on the campus gates.

"There are escape ladders and netting." Said Deb. "Someone must have survived."

"It doesn't look that badly damaged."

They'd arrived in a Fifth West modified four wheel drive. It was screened from detection by technology she didn't need to understand. Quiet and its engine wasn't affected by the numerous disruption towers erected by the alien robots. Leaving the four wheel drive on the roadway to look over the cruise ship was risky, but it was what they'd come to do.

"The aliens know we're beaten." Said Iris. "How long is it since we ran into even one of them?"

"Months ago, in the hardware store in Filey."

"Come on then, we did come to look at the ship. Just don't expect me to climb up any ropes dear."

"I won't."

Had they really come to look over the ship? Increasingly their trips out were more about getting some time away from the campus. Seeing the same faces day after day....They were nice people, but sometimes there was a need for a little space. In a way Deb was spoiled; very few other people could have simply borrowed a Fifth West vehicle for the day. Deb followed Iris across the beach.

"Yes, I can see the holes now." Said Iris. "She must have hit rocks somewhere."

"Someone must have survived to use the escape ladders."

Jagged holes close to the water line, lots of jagged holes. They'd probably caused the vessel to end up on the beach, but not immediately. The huge ship had probably drifted south along the coast, before ending up where it was.

"I could easily get inside." Said Deb. "Just for a quick look around."

The cruise ship was, or rather had been the Dimitri Zhukov. Probably a Russian ship, though nationality was something that didn't seem to matter anymore. The Dimitri had come to rest at an angle of about ten, maybe fifteen degrees. Internal stairs might well be difficult to climb.

"No, you're not leaving me here." Yelled Iris. "I'm coming with you."

The ship had probably done all the settling into the pebbles it was likely to do. Plus it didn't seem to have shifted much since the first Fifth West patrol had spotted it. Deb could have the usual hour long fight with Iris, but the incoming tide couldn't be argued with.

"Alright Iris....Just be careful. We've about two hours until the tide comes in, so let's get moving."

Iris was a fairly sprightly old lady now and Deb had no intention of going far inside the cruise ship. Ideally they'd find something in a cargo hold to justify the trip. A crate of caviar would be nice, or some genuine Russian vodka. They each had modified rechargeable flashlights, guaranteed to be disruption proof. The flashlights had become status symbols in the campus, carried at all times. Deb had hers on a hook at the front of her fatigues. The first ragged hole led into a mass of pipes and cables.

"No good, we'll try the next hole in the hull." Said Deb.

After months of living in derelict buildings, living on what they could scavenge. It was amazing how much a warm bed, decent food and a few supplements had changed Iris. Actually, Deb felt pretty good too, after a bit of Fifth West TLC. Iris didn't actually sprint, the pebbles were always going to make that impossible. She was waiting for Deb though, her flashlight aimed into the bowels of the Dimitri.

"Look Deb, almost as bright as day....And no pipes."

There was a large jagged rip on the other side of the ship, tearing into it from as high as Deb could see, right down to where the pebbles and sand covered the keel.

“This is the fatal wound, she must have run into the rocks quite close by.” Said Deb.

They still needed their flashlights in places, but the daylight was now reaching places the designers had never intended it to reach. Deb took the lead, giving Iris plenty of time to catch up with her.

“Where are we going ?” Asked Iris.

“Nowhere really, just looking around.....Let luck decide what we find, if anything.”

The sound of a clanging door made Deb cautious, but it also made her curious. She had a gun in a holster, just an automatic loaded with ordinary bullets. Not much use against alien robots, but a good defence against humans who’d turned feral. There seemed to be an ever growing number of those.

“Oh, it’s just clanging with the movement of the ship.” Said Iris.

It didn’t feel as though the huge vessel was moving at all, yet the slowly swinging door proved it was. Every wave that rolled in from the North Sea, sent the door clanging into its frame.

“As we’re here, we might as well look inside.” Said Deb.

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