

Ishmael

Chapter 1 – Fifth West Corporation

“The first contact had been decades before, but everyone had ignored it. An object which had speeded up and changed course to come closer to planet Earth obviously wasn’t just another passing asteroid. The public thought it was nothing more than a passing anomaly. Later it became obvious that something had found us.....”



Ishmael McGrath was on time for his interview, the high speed underground link from Cuffley New Town had been working well for once. He looked up at the Fifth West Corporation, London headquarters building and hoped they saw it in him, the creative spark all their job adverts kept mentioning.

‘Fifth West, where we care more about you as a person, than just your qualifications.’

‘Fifth West, looking for people with that certain something, that creative spark.’

‘Fifth West, employers with a difference.’

It was the bit about not being too concerned with qualifications that appealed to Ishmael. After a falling out with a college lecturer, he’d left higher education with no VoEd Certificate and a note on his reference for insulting behaviour to his lecturer.

“Please let them see it in me, whatever ‘it’ is.” He muttered.

Ishmael had his invitation letter in his hand and his Citizenship A1 Card. He only realised the security guard was a DaHu when it was too late to join the queue for another door. As a child he’d thought of the damaged humans as bogeymen. Not only unkind, but also untrue, they were no nicer or more unpleasant than any other human. DaHus was the term he used for them pronounced as DarHues. Only when he spoke to Pandora of course, no one else knew about what he saw. There had been his mother, he’d told her about the bogeymen. That had ended up with him being sent to a child psychiatrist every week for a year. As far as his mum was concerned, he was now cured.

“Everything is fine Mr McGrath; you may enter the Fifth West building.” Said the guard.

“Thank you.”

All done by cameras, small drones and the best AI money could buy. Once through the door the building knew him. It knew where he was, what he was doing and most importantly, where he was supposed to be.

“Mr McGrath, please take elevator G to the twelfth floor.”

The elevator was waiting for him and went up without him having to press any buttons. Fifth West Corporation were good at automation and artificial intelligence, as well as numerous other things, all based around Tech and AI. They were the sixth largest multinational on the planet, with ambitions to be number five by the end of the year.

“Mr McGrath, Lianne will be ready to see you in three minutes.”

The twelfth floor was one large open plan office, with several coloured drones hovering about in a dozen or so places. One was projecting a name above it; refracted light in a rainbow of colours, one of Fifth West’s many lucrative patents.

'Lianne.' In three foot high glowing letters, was about halfway across the open plan. Ishmael (Ish only to Pandora, even his mum called him Ishmael), was still a little unsure about working for Fifth West. They had a ten star rating as an employer on PopNet, but their recruiting techniques seemed so retro.

"This form, they still ask for gender." Pandora had said. "No one asks, hasn't for years. It's a minefield Ish, this is the seventies after all."

He agreed with her, twenty seventy five and they still sent out forms to be filled in by hand. They also asked for gender and sexual orientation. It was almost as if they were begging for someone to start a class action against them.

"Hello Ishmael, you may call me Lianne, please be seated."

She was gorgeous, her clothes expensive. She had a fascinator on the left side of her head. Every woman under thirty seemed to be wearing one. Lots of coloured silks and brightly coloured feathers. All fake simulated fabrics of course, but even her fascinator probably cost more than he'd earned the previous year. Ish did as he was told; he sat in the comfortable looking chair.

"Thank you for seeing me." He said.

There was a screen on her desk; everyone had a screen, even the guy at the corner store. Lianne was ignoring her screen for now, reading his application form. His spider scrawl handwriting looked even worse upside down.

"You left several questions unanswered Ishmael." She said. "Not compulsory questions, but here at Fifth West we like to get to know the people we hire."

He felt like telling her he'd avoided questions he thought were inappropriate, but he really did want the job. Lianne picked up a pen and aimed it at the first empty box on his form.

"What do you like to be called Ishmael ? What do your friends call you ?"

"Everyone calls me Ishmael, even my mum. My girlfriend Pandora calls me Ish, but only her."

No good, Lianne had written Ish in the box and was turning the pages to find the next empty box.

"Good Ish, that brings me to another question you ignored. Out of order, but we can come back to the others. You never put any names in the current relationships box. I'll put in Pandora, any others ?"

"Is this really necessary ?" He asked. "It all seems so..... Intrusive."

Lianne put her pen down and sat back, smiling at him as she did so. A really nice smile, but she was way out of his league, and anyway.....There was Pandora, his best friend and lover.

"We do things different here Ish." Said Lianne. "I can't think of many organisations who'd look twice at your résumé, but we don't work like that at Fifth West. Most companies use AI to scan job applications and choose suitable candidates to interview. We actually sell the software and tech, though we don't use it ourselves."

"That must put people off buying it." He said

"You'd think so, but it doesn't. With so much litigation over what is and isn't considered relevant questions to ask, it's far simpler for companies to automate the whole dreadful process. All CVs now look the same of course, vacancies filled with grey people who have no..... Spark. Here at Fifth West, we do it differently."

"Do you get sued ?"

"Sometimes Ish, but we have very good lawyers.... Now, any other current relationships ?"

"No, just Pandora."

"What do you call her ?"

Ish was distracted by seeing a DaHu sitting at another desk, talking to another Fifth West interviewer. He was seeing more damaged humans now, far more than he had as a child. Then he thought of them as demons and monsters. Now he knew it was all some kind of hallucination. At eighteen he'd obtained his medical records.

'Hallucinations bordering on psychosis, brought on by extreme anxiety, cause unknown. Condition responded well to medication, with full remission at the age of nine.'

There had been no remission, he'd just learned how to hide his reactions to the demons and pretend he was normal. They'd told him adults would never understand. A particularly vivid hallucination had told him to pretend he was no longer seeing things. Ish often wondered what a psychiatrist would make of that.

"Do you know him ? Is he a friend ?" Asked Lianne.

"No, sorry I was thinking. I call her Biff, only me, her family call her Dora. It's just that the reason I call her Biff is so..... It'll sound lame."

"You must learn to open up Ish. Talk to me about your Pandora, your Biff. How did you meet ?"

"We didn't really meet, she's always been there. Our mums knew each other from a book club and gave birth to us just a few weeks apart. My mum was into American literature, especially Melville's great white whale. That's how I ended up with an antique name like Ishmael."

"Classic names are making a comeback. We had an Isambard in here for an interview last week. And Pandora, was she named after a character in an old book ?"

"Sort of, her mum was really into the Greek myths."

"So why Biff ? I promise not to think it's lame."

Ish caught a glimpse of the damaged human again, the DaHu. It appeared his interview was over and he was shaking hands with the interviewer. He had one good eye and one hanging down across his cheek. All an hallucination of course, no one could survive having the side of their head crushed, their jaw pushed over like that. Blood too, so much he'd be leaving puddles of it as he walked, if it had been real. As a small child the demons had terrified him, now he wondered why he was seeing so many of them.

'Hallucinations bordering on psychosis, brought on by extreme anxiety, cause unknown.'

No wonder he'd never settled anywhere and screwed up at college. Sometimes it seemed a miracle he hadn't ended up in an institution. Biff though.... He decided to give a truthful answer, even if it really did sound lame.

"Pandora was born exactly twenty days after me, but she looked a lot smaller than me when we were kids. She still is quite small, but so is her mum, so it must run in the family. Anyway, I teased her a lot when we were about five or six, calling her titch and other silly things. One day she hit me, really hard, right in the face. It hurt, my nose bled and my right eye developed a bruise that lasted for days. Pandora said I was her best friend, but I deserved to be biffed on the nose. So, to me at least, she'll always be Biff."

"That's not lame Ish.... See you're learning to open up. I'm sure you'll be relieved to hear I won't be writing any of that down. One last question Ishmael McGrath, a serious one I really need you to tell me about."

Oh, she was popping up a screen, that meant looking back over his CV or college history. Bad news as there was nothing much in either that marked him down as someone Fifth West needed to hire. He had given them permission to look up his school and college records. There it was, his old school's logo on his leaver report. She waved at the screen, causing it to move so he could see it clearly.

“Not good Ish, a lot of must try harder comments. The interesting thing is that every teacher thinks you have the potential to do well. You were in the top academic tier and your maths teacher said..... Let me bring it up.... You have a level of inductive reasoning that borders on genius.”

Lianne closed up the screen and looked at him, for long enough to make him feel uncomfortable.

“I will be recommending you for a second interview Ish. But why, with all that potential.... Have you ended up in several dead end, low paid jobs ? What went wrong ?”

He could hardly tell her the truth. Well you see Lianne, I had these hallucinations that began when I was about three. I saw huge monsters coming out of the clouds. Monsters surrounded by other smaller monsters, so many that they darkened the sky. About the same time I started seeing demons, people so hideously deformed that they should have been dead. Then to top it all off, I had minor surgery when I was about five. Under anaesthesia I had a long discussion with the hallucinations who told me to tell everyone I wasn't hallucinating anymore. No, there was no way he was going to tell all that to anyone but Pandora. Lianne would get some of the official truth, the nonsense on his medical records.

“Have you looked up my childhood medical history ?” He asked.

“No, that information is sealed, forever. You can tell me about it, but only if you really want to.”

She'd given him a way out and he would probably still get the second interview. She was good though, skilled at her chosen profession. Ish now thought of Lianne as a friend.

“I had something called Nephophobia when I was small, a fear of clouds. I developed it one day while in our local park, lying on the ground looking up at the sky. It became so bad that I refused to leave the house when the sky was full of fluffy cotton wool clouds. Its arrival was sudden and a mystery and it left just as suddenly. I had some remission after about a year of treatment and no further problems after I was about nine.”

“It must have been dreadful Ish. Thank you for telling me, but..... Sorry to push, but why is that connected with your inability to settle into college or a decent job ?”

Why indeed ? It was something Biff had pushed him about. It had to be hard for her in many ways. Biff was well on her way to becoming a medical doctor, while her boyfriend was working in any crap job that kept him fed and his national health cover up to date.

“I can give you my own ideas if you like ? I'm no expert though.”

“Go on Ish, you'll get a second interview, I promise. Unless you're about to tell me you're a serial killer of course, or heavily into pornography.”

Lianne was grinning at him. How old was she ? He was useless at guessing such things. To avoid unintentionally insulting people, he took a guess at their age and took off five years. Based on the Ish principle, she was about twenty five.

“Right, this is my totally unofficial theory.” He began. “All those hallucinations forced my brain to try to find some sort of order in the madness, a pattern to it all, a little sanity. It caused my one main fault, I'm not good at structured learning, or structured anything really.”

“You just described the ideal Fifth West employee ish.... Keep going.”

“I pestered my mother for the rules to reading, not realising that the English language is barely organised chaos. She did her best though and I taught myself to read. I can drive just about anything, all from observation and picking up the rules.”

“Can I make notes, this is important ?” Asked Lianne.

“If you like. The maths teacher, the one who spoke highly of me... One summer vacation he sent me home with a puzzle involving seventeen sided polygons. He told me it was supposed to be impossible to solve, but only after I'd given him the solution. He wanted to write a paper on it, until I

begged him not to. That's another character trait gained from my childhood problems, I don't like fuss, or crowds, or people who never use one word where ten will do."

"I can see how that would be a problem Ish. Not here though, I'll ask our admin people to schedule a second interview and send you a letter."

Letters, another eccentricity of Fifth West. No one used letters apart from them. The serious media ran stories about Fifth West Corporation keeping the beleaguered postal service afloat.

"How old are you?" He asked.

"That was unexpected Ish, but you have answered all my questions.... I'm thirty. The truth now, what was your best guess?"

"Twenty five, maybe six."

"Thank you, I'll let you ask one more question."

"What are my chances of getting the job?"

"About ninety percent at the moment, but you might screw up the second interview. Practise with Biff, get her to ask you lots of awkward questions. Loved ones are good at that, they know where all the deepest emotional scars are located."

Ish shook her hand, another antiquated piece of behaviour Fifth West seemed to love. He thanked her and walked back towards the elevators. No voice telling him where to go, it was probably assumed that once in the building, he'd be able to find his own way out. He saw another DaHu on the ground floor. Three in one building, that was very rare.

Like most companies, Fifth West blocked all mobile devices in their buildings apart from their own. His F-Phone announced it had come back to life by beeping. There was a text message.

'Hope it went well Biff'

Tempting to call her, but it was her day for dissection. There was probably a long word to describe it in Latin or old world Greek, but it meant she was likely to be up to her elbows in a cadaver. He sent a text reply.

'Looking good Got a second interview Ish'

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Inka Malovic worked part time as a receptionist for a dental practise in Stourbridge near Birmingham. There are those who claim that all our lives are linked in some way, there's even a name for it, Synchronicity. Inka wouldn't have recognised Ishmael McGrath if she'd passed him in the street, yet there was a connection. Her brother Ivan had died at the exact same moment as Ian McGrath, Ishmael's father. They'd both been on the same London to Belgrade flight, as it had crashed due to a technical fault, killing everyone onboard.

"What do you pair want for dinner?" She asked.

"Anything." Said Antun.

"I'm not that hungry." Said Kata.

It was the same every evening and from what her friends told her, all mums went through the same hell every meal time. Kata was sixteen and already far too keen on trying to keep a trim figure. As for her thirteen year old son Antun? He was a dustbin who'd eat just about anything, though he preferred junk food. Their father had gone to see his family in Croatia two summers before and hadn't bothered coming back. Probably for the best, he'd been a complete bastard. Inka opened the freezer and went through the usual routine.

"There's mini Kiev's?..... Or the hot and spicy chicken you like?"

"Yeah alright." Said Antun, with no enthusiasm.

"Can I go to Gemma's mum?" Asked Kata.

It was a weeknight and the family finances were far from brilliant, but there was one thing guaranteed to keep her kids happy. Even her daughter forgot about excess calories when it came to a certain type of food.

"I could order pizza?"

"Brilliant." Said Kata.

No need for Antun to say anything, the grin on his face said it all. Her kids were addicted to thin and crispy pizza, though they were fussy about their toppings. There was the standard Malovic family order under a fridge magnet. Inka phoned in her order and joined her kid in the lounge to watch the early evening news. There was a large tear dropped shaped rock on the screen.

"What's that?" She asked.

"Oh mum, it's the asteroid.... You must have heard about it." Said Kata.

Her teenage daughter had actually sighed at her, sadly not for the first time. There was a woman talking about the asteroid, stating that the picture was just an artist's impression.

'..... As with asteroid Mictlantecuhtli five years ago, our current celestial visitor increased speed as it headed towards the inner planets.....'

Why did they always give these things such weird unpronounceable names? It appeared that the asteroid was the size of an aircraft carrier and had changed course slightly, bringing it within fifty thousand miles of Earth.

'Almost in our backyard.' Said the quirky science guy on C28 News.

"It has obviously come here deliberately." Said Inka. "Why aren't the military..... Doing something?"

"Oh mum.....Mr Mateer at school explained it at assembly." Said Kata.

"He's really clever, better than the TV guy." Added Antun.

Great, her daughter sighing at her ignorance and even her thirteen year old seemed to know more about the alien space..... Thing, than she did. Inka settled back in her chair and let her daughter explain what Mr Mateer had told all the kids at school.

"It's the heat of the sun mum, it causes gases to boil out of Lixpuzteque."

Great, they'd called this one after yet another weird Aztec God with a tongue twister name.

"The closer it comes to the sun, the hotter it gets." Said Kata. "The gas comes out as jets, which act like rocket engines, speeding it up and changing its course. Relax mum, there are no little green men inside it."

It sounded logical, but the woman was back on the TV, pointing at a map of the asteroid's journey through our solar system. It did seem to have changed course a lot of times for a lifeless lump of rock.

'.....The European Space Agency are diverting the Juno probe currently on its way to Ganymede..... It should reach Lixpuzteque in a little under six months.'

"Six months." Said Inka. "Supposing it's dangerous?"

"Oh mum....."

Inka didn't want to hear another sigh from her daughter and anyway, the pizza delivery guy was rattling the letterbox. Everyone had to rattle their letterbox lid or thump on the door, the doorbell had packed up during the winter. The delivery guy looked about eighteen and actually flirted with her a little, which compensated for her daughter talking to her as though she was ancient and out of touch.

"What do you think of this asteroid?" She asked him, as he handed over two pizza boxes.

"Aliens lady..... My dad thinks I'm crazy..... But I think they're looking us over."

"I don't think you're crazy."

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Pandora Gray lived in Cuffley New Town, only a few streets away from Ish. Cuffley was the last of the new towns, built to house the ever growing population of London and the South East. Locals moaned of course, especially the residents of nearby Hatfield. Now the new expanded London was home to nineteen million people and although Cuffley New Town still got some stick in the media, it was now firmly on the map.

"Mum, it's me..... Are you home ?" She called from the door.

It was nice being able to live at home while attending medical school in Central London. The high speed underground link was still playing up, but the fares were cheap.

"I'm upstairs in my den." Called Judy Gray, her mother.

Her mother was a freelance writer in between fund raising for good causes and numerous pet projects. There had been a few well paid online magazine articles, but Judy Gray was still like most freelance writers, waiting to be discovered. Her father Karl was something in re-insurance. So boring he refused to discuss it, but it paid the bills. Pandora found her mother at her desk, tapping away at a keyboard, while watching the evening news with the sound down.

"How was your day ?" Asked her mum.

"Don't ask..... Lots of dissection."

"Ewww, rather you than me Dora..... Hungry ?"

"You know me I'm always hungry. What are you working on ?"

"A dreadful piece about what shoes to buy for the summer..... I know Dora, I know, but it's for Zinfella Magazine and they pay well."

"Oh dear, selling out mum, I knew it."

"It keeps us fed sweetie.... I'll do one of my lasagnes for tonight. I take it Ishmael will be joining us for dinner."

"I already invited him..... He had some good news today, a second interview with Fifth West."

"Wow, that is good. What job did he go for ?"

"They don't do it like that mum. If they think you have the right creative spark, they fit you into the organisation where you'll be a good fit."

"So he might end up in sales and marketing."

"Please mum, don't say that to Ishmael. Is it alright if he stays the night ?"

She was twenty and so was Ishmael, though he was the oldest by just twenty days. There had been the usual 'while you're in our house,' conversation after her dad had caught Ishmael leaving the house at five one Saturday morning. They had both been fifteen then. So far, since she'd turned eighteen, her mum had never said no. Pandora thought that was a bit of a ploy by her mum, to stop her moving into student accommodation.

"Of course he can, but thank you for asking. We then know it's not burglars in the house."

"Sorry, has he been pacing about ? Ishmael does that when he gets a bit anxious."

"We're getting used to it sweetie."

The small screen on her mum's desk was showing the artists impression of the asteroid everyone was talking about. Her mum turned the volume up.

'.....The European Space Agency are diverting the Juno probe currently on its way to Ganymede..... It should reach Lixpuzteque in a little under six months.'

"It won't look anything like that." Said her mum. "Remember the one five years ago ? When a Chinese probe finally reached it, it looked like a huge lump of rubble."

"I know, but still.... It's huge and seemed to deliberately head towards Earth. Some of my friends are quite worried about it."

"Trust me Dora, there are better things to worry about. This Lixputz-whatever will just turn out to be another big space rock."

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Matthew Newman was a member of His Majesty's armed forces. His rank and unit were both secret, even his wife Deborah wasn't aware of half the things he'd been involved in. There had been covert operations in the Middle East, assassinations in South America and a little mayhem in the Baltic States. All under orders from the Ministry of Defence and all top secret. As Matt had once joked with his wife.

"The only thing we'll never be asked to do is peace keeping."

Their base was near Heslington in the area on England just north of York. The base didn't look impressive, just lots of grubby looking buildings in need of a fresh coat of paint. The perimeter chain link fence was rusty and the front gate was usually just guarded by a solitary soldier. All for show of course, all to convince the locals that nothing much happened at Heslington camp. In reality there were pressure pads, heat sensors, big ear listening devices and even quiet drones at night.

"We'll know if a gnat farts anywhere within a mile of the base."

A proud base commander had once told a visiting MOD inspection team. At only twenty seven, Matt had seen a lot of action and faced a lot of enemies. Nothing had prepared him for the briefing that morning, or the threat it implied.

"Nothing you hear goes beyond this room." Said the man from the ministry.

A mystery official who'd arrived with a well-known member of UK special forces, or at least as well-known as they can ever be. Matt had seen him before, running a training course in the Cairngorms. The idea was probably to add credibility to their unknown guest and the briefing Matt was never likely to forget.

"I mean no one, not even your wives, children or mistresses. You tell no one."

There was a little polite laughter, visitors from the MOD seemed to appreciate it. Their visitor used a remote control and a map of the night sky appeared on the screen, the big screen usually used to plan raids into places the other side of the world.

"You all know about the asteroid with the silly name. You will also realise it wasn't the first to change course and come closer to our planet."

Matt relaxed and went into a semi-sleep state he'd perfect for nonsense briefings. Some fool at the MOD had decided the space rocks needed to be included in a briefing, so another fool could tick a box on a list. He'd sat through them all, from bird flu to terrorists smearing ricin on buttons in elevators. He didn't remain half asleep for long.

"What has never become public knowledge is the close passing asteroid of twenty forty one. It came so close that it skimmed the atmosphere, before accelerating away at about three times the speed of sound. It was that incident which led to the conclusion that these aren't natural occurrences. Not to be too dramatic about it, but these asteroids are being controlled by an extra-terrestrial intelligence, for purposes we don't understand."

A lot of hands went up, all ignored.

"Questions at the end please..... Moving on, this picture shows the best resolution the Chinese can get from their Yi Xing space telescope."

It was nothing really, just light coloured blobs against what looked like the rings of Saturn.

“There are over a dozen moving objects, all moving towards Earth. Some are quite small, but most are about the size of one of our aircraft carriers. They were only spotted a few weeks ago and are still a long way from the inner planets. At their present speed, it will be eighteen months before they’re anywhere near planet Earth.”

Matt’s hand went up and stayed up. The guest speaker glared at him, but he was determined to ask his question. He was annoyed rather than curious, annoyed that the MOD were giving him a headache for which there was no cure. Eventually the expert from the ministry stopped ignoring him.

“I do admire your persistence.... What is your question ?”

“So we’ve some aliens doing a fly-by, what are we supposed to do about it ? If the Americans and the Chinese get competitive about it, there might be a handful of unarmed drones arriving at these asteroids..... In about... Let’s say a few months after next Christmas. There is nothing we can do. Now if there was an alien running amok in the Brazilian rain forest. That would be something we could help you with.”

There was silence for a few moments, as the unnamed man from the ministry muttered at his colleague.

“Actually call it Australia rather than Brazil and you’ve just described why I’m here. A small asteroid hit the atmosphere hard and slowed down enough to land somewhere near Kakadu National Park in the northern territories. Survey teams investigated the area and..... There have been fatalities. The Australians have asked for our assistance.”

Synchronicity was at work again, though Matt was completely unaware of it. He might not have recognised Ishmael McGrath if he’d passed him in the street, but his wife might have. Deborah Newman was a nurse and worked in a busy A&E department in York. The previous summer she’d treated a nineteen year old Ishmael for a nosebleed that refused to stop. Ish had been in York visiting relatives.

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