

Ishmael II : Pandora

Chapter 3 – Big Town

“The plastic case was full of currency, Russian Federation by the look of it and all high value notes. It felt so weird to empty untold wealth over the grubby floor, but the cash was just so much waste paper now.”



When Mateo Lopez had first seen the church tower through the trees, he'd hoped to find a small town, or at least a sizeable village. As sometimes happens the people of the village had moved on, leaving just a church on a hillside. A mile or so north of the church they'd found two houses and a dilapidated barn near a crossroads. No idea where they were, there were no road signs, or any name given for the village the two houses had once belonged to.

“We'll call it Big Town.” Tina, his eight year old had told him.

Did names now matter anyway ? Names for places had been used to move around, this town was five miles from that village and was on the whatever train line. Now that all seemed so unimportant. There were no train, no cars and even the roads were being rapidly reclaimed by nature. The aliens were building quite a few structures, but they didn't seem to use roads. Now the Mateo family were like settlers in a new world and could name places whatever they pleased. Mateo toyed with the idea of Lopezville, though his wife Helen had preferred Lopez Hollow. In the end though Tina got her way, she usually did. Not that Big Town was supposed to have been their home for long. They'd found someone's food store though and there seemed to be advantages to living somewhere small, somewhere the aliens didn't think was worth looking at.

“Oh, what has she found now ?” Asked Helen.

They were supposed to be looking after the kitchen garden as a family, but as always, the kids had become bored after about ten minutes and gone to look for something more interesting to do. Tina was a hyperactive eight year old. Actually she was probably nine by now and his son Tom was probably seven. Dates, birthdays and anniversaries were something else that didn't seem to matter anymore. Where Tina went Tom went, even if sometimes a little reluctantly.

“It works dad.... Apart from the bucked wheel.” Shouted Tina.

Before the invasion he'd been a senior executive with Torbay Council. There had been hints that he might get the top job before he hit fifty. Now he seemed to have become chief repairer of the assorted broken items his daughter acquired. He looked the pedal bike over and it looked to be in good condition, apart from the buckled wheel. An adult bike with a crossbar, but she'd grow into it.

“Yes, I'm sure I can fix that for you. Let your brother use it sometimes though.”

“He can't ride a bike.”

“Then teach him.”

Before they'd run away from the bunker his daughter would have pulled a face. Now she gave her brother a friendly thump on the shoulder. They were bonding, though it was sad it had taken an alien invasion to do it.

“What do you think Tom.” Said Tina. “Do you want to learn how to ride a bike ?”

“Yes.”

“No, you're too stupid.”

A tussle followed, they seemed to wrestle at least four times a day. At one time Helen had tried to break them up. Now they both thought of it as their kids getting exercise and learning how to fight. At the moment those kinds of skills were worth more than any first class degree.

"Oi, put the pedal bike in the barn before you run off again." Said Helen. "And be careful where you go looting..... You remember why."

"Dad says it's not looting, we're living off the land." Said Tina.

That's it, drag him into it. Tina was right though, the situation in Britain and possibly the rest of the world had passed the point when the concept of looting had any meaning. Two thirds of the population was probably dead or dying.

"Just be careful what you pick up." Said Helen.

"We will." Said Tom.

A few weeks before, they'd found the cases and bags of a group of people who hadn't made it to wherever they were going. No idea how they'd died, the bodies had been lying on the side of the stream for too long. His kids seemed to take finding decaying corpses better than him, or Helen for that matter. Still, it was an experience he didn't want them to go through again. Now they looked everything over from a safe distance before picking it up. Mind you, quite a few items in the cases had been very useful.

"Where do they get the energy?" Asked Helen. "They only stop to eat."

"We need to work out a way to keep a note of their ages." He said. "I'm sure we've missed both their birthdays. They can't be eight and six forever."

"Oh, yes....Tina did ask me if she was nine yet. We can do it by the number of summers they've seen. I can keep a note of it in marker on the kitchen wall."

"That was how the Vikings measured their ages." He said.

Why it was so funny he had no idea. Helen began laughing and it was infectious. His wife held up a garden spade and made a few loud battle cry sounds. It was all wonderfully ludicrous.

"We're turning into Vikings." Yelled Helen.

Mateo was happy, despite their circumstances, or maybe because of them. With the supply of tins they'd found in the house and the fresh food grown in the kitchen garden, they were eating well. They did have a pretty good life, as long as no one got seriously sick. He had a feeling though that the aliens hadn't finished fucking with their lives yet.

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"There has to be a fur coat somewhere." Said Iris. "I've always wanted a fur coat. It doesn't have to be real fur of course; some of the fake ones look wonderful."

"We've a couple of hours until the tide turns, make the most of them Iris." Said Deb Newman.

"There's always tomorrow." Said Iris

"I'm part of the forward planning team and we've got meetings for the next three days."

The deliberately loud sighs from Iris every time she mentioned her job were beginning to be annoying. They should have called it something different of course, forward planning team did sound a bit naff. They were doing good work though.

"No more sighs Iris." She snapped. "We wouldn't have the Fifth West vehicle to drive around if I wasn't on the forward planning team."

"Sorry dear.....Now help me find a fur coat."

The clanging door on the beached cruise ship had led to a baggage hold. There had probably been a lot of wealthy passengers on the ship when it set off for wherever it had been heading. The hold was full of expensive looking luggage and quite a few cabin trunks. Deb always carried a claw hammer in

her utility belt; it could double as an effective weapon. She heard Iris gasp as she used the hammer to remove the padlocks from a cabin trunk.

“Deb !”

“What ? No one is ever going to come back for it....Any of it.”

Deb had noticed that Iris learned fast and had a fairly flexible morality. She was soon using a large screwdriver to jemmy open the locks on a very expensive pair of suitcases. Deb opened the cabin trunk and gasped.

“I don’t believe it.” She said. “Mind you.....I think we’re both owed a little good luck.”

“What have you found ?” Asked Iris.

Deb pulled it out of the case hoping it wasn’t damp and beginning to rot. It wasn’t, the large fur coat was in perfect condition. Too large for Iris, though Deb couldn’t see her minding that. Real fur or one of the good fakes ? Deb didn’t really care when she saw the look on her friend’s face. Iris actually made a whooping sound as she claimed the coat.

“That is exactly what I’ve always wanted.”

No good warning her about getting it muddy or stained by the dirt of the floor, Iris already had the huge coat on and was rolling up the sleeves. It didn’t fit anywhere on Iris. The sleeves were far too long even when rolled up and the bottom six inches were rubbing on the floor. Iris was tiny, barely five feet tall, but the coat had been made for a six foot tall Russian Valkyrie of a woman. No good telling her that, Iris had obviously fallen in love with it.

“Take it off when we leave, or it’ll trip you up on the stairs.”

“I’m not stupid dear.”

There were a lot of other useful pieces of clothing in the trunk. The campus supplied them with the basics, but everything had a military uniform look about it. The owner of the trunk had probably been a showgirl, lots of dresses and tops covered in sequins and glitter. The jeans were good quality though, even if they’d need shortening. Deb held a pair up to her waist and looked at the amount of leg still rolled up on the floor.

“Wow, she must have been six foot six or seven Iris.”

No good, Iris was busy busting open another case, while still wearing the size one hundred coat on a size five body.

“I’ve found a dressing gown, a nice fluffy one dear.”

“And the Valkyrie who owned this trunk has....Genuine silk underwear.”

Both real finds, even if a bit of cutting and sewing was required. Deb had to find a case that looked waterproof though, to get everything back to the campus without it getting muddy, sandy or rained on. The locks on a large plastic case had succumbed to the attention of her claw hammer when Deb heard Iris make a strange choking sound.

“Are you alright.....”

There was something about the eyes of the woman who had hold of Iris, an arm around her neck. One of the crew by the look of it, she still wore a uniform with a company motto on the breast pocket, though she was too far away for it to be readable. Deb put away the hammer and replaced it with the gun she carried everywhere.

“Hurt her and I will shoot you.” Said Deb.

“She will, she’s done it before.” Said Iris.

There was that odd look in her eyes again, as the woman squeezed harder to stop Iris talking. Many bodies had been examined by the campus medical team, just in case there was an alien toxin

involved, or perhaps something viral. Nothing had ever been found. Andy Korenberg had even talked about it at one of their regular Friday morning briefings.

“Some people just react badly to the reality of something like an alien invasion.” He’d said. “There have been stories of cannibalism in some remote locations, a few of our pilots have seen some dreadful things. Maybe stress plays a part, or an existing mental condition. We may never know why some people seem to turn into feral creatures, but it doesn’t seem to be the work of the aliens.”

The term zombie was frowned on as being disrespectful to people who were as much victim of the invasion as those who’d been physically injured. Some of the wild humans could be reasoned with, but most couldn’t.

“We have food..... Leave her alone and I’ll give you all the food we have.” Said Deb.

No reaction at all and Iris was beginning to go a little pale as her throat was squeezed even tighter. Stuck somewhere on the cruise ship for months, the crew member had probably ended up eating her dead crewmates. There was one scientist at the campus looking into the idea of a prion disease caused by eating human flesh. Sadly he was one of the six scientists killed during the bombing.

“I’m not going to let you carrying on hurting my friend.... Let her go.”

No proper words, the woman growled at her like some kind of animal, actually pulling her lips back from her teeth and flaring her nostrils. All the time Iris was struggling less.

“Now..... Let go of her or I will kill you.”

Deb had faced a few of the feral beasts who had once been normal people. The ones that didn’t talk never responded to threats, they probably didn’t understand words anymore. She fired three times aiming for the centre of the woman’s chest. Deb wasn’t the best shot in the world, but all three round hit about where the woman’s heart had to be.

“Sorry.” Said Deb.

She meant it, every human death seemed to be helping the aliens by bringing the extinction of mankind one life closer. There was no way to cure the feral humans, the medical team had tried. Not that her adversary was going to die easily. Deb had heard it was possible to move about, even with a shattered heart. The woman in uniform remained on her feet and turned towards the door. She even managed three steps before falling flat on her face. The sound of her head hitting the metal floor was something Deb knew she’d hear in her nightmares for a while.

“Are you alright Iris.”

No words just a lot of coughing, though Iris was giving her the thumbs up sign. There was the woman to check for signs of life, before she helped Iris. No risking the woman coming at her back as she tried to help her friend. Deb felt for a pulse and there wasn’t one, in her neck, or her wrist.

“Is she dead.” Asked Iris, her voice still broken.

“Yes, she is.”

“Good.”

Deb had come to the conclusion that Iris was probably directly descended from Genghis Khan, or one of his generals at the very least. Iris next, she pulled her top down to get a good look at her neck. Her friend seemed to be fine, though her throat would probably be bruised for a while.

“Doesn’t look too bad..... How do you feel ?”

“Tired Deb, can we take what we found and go home now, please ?”

“No problem, everything can go in the waterproof plastic case. Take off your coat, it can go in there first.”

Iris was giving her a look that said she wanted to wear the fur coat everywhere until it fell apart.

"It'll trip you up on the stairs and get ruined when we cross the pebbly beach." Said Deb. "Take it off Iris.....Come on, I'll even shorten it for you this evening."

"Really?"

"Scout's honour Iris."

The plastic case was full of currency, Russian Federation by the look of it and all high value notes. It felt so weird to empty untold wealth over the grubby floor, but the cash was just so much waste paper now. In went the fur coat with everything else put on top of it. The case even still closed properly once everything was inside it.

"Do you need to rest for a while?" Asked Deb.

"Didn't you want genuine Russian vodka Deb? Have a quick look around while I take a breather."

"Be honest Iris, are you alright?"

"I will be you know me.....Go, find that Vodka you wanted."

Deb had no doubt that Iris would be fine, there was definitely a lot of Genghis in her genes somewhere. There was a fenced off section of the hold with boxes in it, the sort of boxes booze usually arrives in. The lock on the door had been left open by whoever had emptied two or three boxes. The crew before things got serious probably, or maybe looters.

"I found some." She yelled.

Two boxes in a corner, unmolested by the looters, who obviously didn't know quality vodka from the cheap crap. The federation had been going through a period of nostalgia when Potemkin had been introduced. The vodka had been distilled and boxed years ago, before anyone had realised an alien invasion was on the way.

"I'm alright now." Shouted Iris. "We can leave now."

"Just give me five minutes, ten at most."

There was a sack barrow and a lot of packing tape. Everything Deb needed to securely fix both boxes of booze to the barrow. Awkward to get over the pebbles, but there was still time to make two trips. She wheeled the barrow to the door that led out onto the stairs.

"Ready Iris? I'll come back for the second case of vodka."

"That is a lot of vodka dear. I thought you meant just a bottle or two."

"It's currency Iris. There are people in the campus who will owe me a huge favour in return for a bottle of genuine Potemkin."

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"Damn it.....Another one just died." Said Art Singer.

Art was definitely a glass half empty guy with a knack of stating the obvious, which was really beginning to annoy Pandora. He knew they'd calculated likely Bio-Bot losses, he'd been shown all the wall charts and maps. Yet he insisted on treating every destroyed bot as a disaster.

"Think of it not as another dead robot, but as a human soldier.....Not being dead." Said Ish.

"We have allowed for losing a third of our Bio-Bots." Said Dora. "The prize is more than worth the sacrifice."

"If you say so." Said Art.

She'd like to have put him in the truck with Fifth West troops, but he was the base commander's eyes and ears, everyone knew that. Francine Lazan was likely to punish them for not showing Art the respect she thought he deserved.

"The sad thing is, I like Art." She'd told Ish that morning.

"So do I Biff, though he really isn't on our side when it comes to campus politics."

Art was rumoured to be having a thing with Deb Newman, which complicated things even further. Ishmael had some sort of mojo going with Deb, a shared destiny thing that most of the campus found a little weird. It made them uncomfortable and Dora could understand that. Ish was currently bouncing about in his chair in the APC.

“Yay, I knew One could do it, he’s locked onto a Horace.” He said.

They had names for most of their converted Bio-Bots, but on the screens they were all numbered. Numbers were easier to follow in the heat of battle. Numbers also meant less sense of loss if one got fried or crushed by the defences inside the alien structure.

“I can’t see..... How far has One got into the bunker ?” Asked Art.

It was no good, something had to be done about Art. He was actually trying to push his way up to see the screens in the middle of a battle.

“You’re not helping Art, sit back and give us a little space.” She said.

“Yeah, you’re being a bit of dick..... Stop it.” Added Ish.

Art moved back and appeared to accept the instruction to be less of a dick. He might report the incident to Francine, or he might not. There would be a minor punishment if he did, one of Francine’s petty little sanctions. Everyone had been their friends until the regular arguments with their ultimate boss Jaroslav Verga, known to everyone as JV. Losing a Fifth West job no longer meant just no pay and a gap to explain on a CV, no one was paid now anyway. It was worse, it meant no food or safe bed for the night. Lose a job on campus and it was life outside again, trying to find a few tins of beans in the wreckage. Hardly surprising that their friends had slowly but surely turned against them, in public. No one fancied the idea of life outside of Fifth West’s protection.

“Did you see that Biff ?” Asked Ish. “I’m sure one of them decided to attack a defence bot. Looks like Eleven, can’t be sure. Can you get Five to pan her camera ?”

Ish referred to some of their bots as she and some he, though she was yet to discern any logical choice in his use of gender. They were sat in front of the big screen, which couldn’t be that big due to the APC being quite small. They had originally tried to control up to forty bots from a single screen, by selecting each in turn. That was quickly abandoned as there was no way for a human operator to react quickly enough when the fighting started. They had experimented and the lost Bio-Bots had taught them a few basic rules.

“It was Five Ish, she’s behaving autonomously as we hoped they would. Wow, she’s kicking arse in there..... Did you see her fry that Bot ? This is amazing.”

“You’ve succeeded in doing the impossible.” Said Art.

Genuine compliment or sarcasm ? Dora was never quite sure anymore.

“One needs support Dora, can you give fifteen to twenty a refresh.” Said Ish.

“Doing it now.”

A refresh meant uploading their instructions again, their battle orders. Only six bots were on the screen all the time, the maximum number they felt confident about controlling. The rest were programmed to follow those six, while acting on their own initiative when threatened. The six bots on the screen were like generals and the Bio-Bot’s foremost duty was to protect them and obey them. Sometimes though, a refresh was needed, a kind of mini-reboot.

“Why do you need so many different types of alien robots ?” Asked Art.

“Later Art, over a bottle of Chilean Merlot.” Said Dora.

One was damaged, but she was still functioning well enough to remain the top dog, the lord of the battlefield. One led the other bots through a destroyed doorway and into a room that obviously hadn’t escaped the battle entirely. Among the debris was something Dora recognised.

"Ish.....Fuck, we're really going to do this." She said.

One and Two both had a Horace in their view, a Horace each. That was good and bad, it had the potential to cause mission confusion.

"I'm setting One's Horace as main target.....Agreed." Said Dora.

"Fine Biff, I'll mark the second Horace as a to be ignored non-combatant."

"Why not simply kill it ?" Asked Art.

She ignored him and so did Ish. There wasn't time to answer his comments and anyway, the obvious answer was to tell him to shut up and get out of the APC. That would probably mean Francine cutting off their wine supply for a few weeks though, so ignoring Art was the preferred choice.

"I'm ordering the crawlers to get busy." Said Ish. "This is definitely looking good Biff."

The crawlers had been unpleasant Bio-Bots the size of a domestic cat. They lurked up near the ceiling, mainly in housing. Probably triggered by light levels, the crawlers tended to attack at night. Sleeping humans never really had a chance to fight back, as a crawler bit into their throats. With a few alterations they made perfect bots to do the fiddly work, like securing the tubes that fed a Horace food and its own modified atmosphere.

"Crap, low frequency vibrations.... And they're building." Said Dora. "It seems one or more Horace is calling for help. We need to be out of here before it arrives."

"We will be, I'm sending in the Gecko."

"Are you sure Ish, the Horace hasn't been secured."

"I am, it's going in.....Now."

She trusted Ish, his judgement was usually sound. It was all going to be a huge success and they'd be the heroes of the campus. Or a complete failure and they'd get no more lab time to pursue Bio-Bot alteration and control.

"I just hope you have that thing under control." Said Art.

"Especially after the damage the last one did, after it escaped." Said Ish.

Dora badly wanted to join in with the teasing, but she wasn't that good at keeping a straight face. There had never been an escaped Gecko, but Art didn't need to know that. The worried look in his face was priceless. The Gecko going past the side of the APC was huge, one of the largest of the alien bio-robots. Forty feet long, it really did look like an overgrown Gecko, right down to the red eyes. A seventh small individual window popped up on the big screen.

"Can I control the Gecko this time Ish ?"

"Fine, I'll get the girls to bring Horace out to the trucks."

The Gecko looked like a difficult to control beast, but it was actually quite easy. With a small brain, little in the way of advanced cognitive skills and almost no desire to act on its own initiative; the monster lizard felt like a driving simulator.

"Five is in trouble again." Said Ish. "We've a bot in need of a protector Biff."

"Almost.....There."

On a training exercise Dora had constantly underestimated the power and destructive ability of the brute she controlled. Never again, she aimed for the wall of the alien structure, rather than one of the doors their Bio-Bots had already opened. Her Gecko was like a well-armoured tank on four legs. One swipe from a front claw and she was inside the building, or actually her creature was. There was a tendency to think of the image on the screen as her eyes, her personal view.

"Going up the ramp in front of me Ish."

"Our Horace is to the right at the top. Be careful, Four and Three are controlling the crawlers.....Horace is on the move."

"I see him Ish.....I'll keep well over to the right."

Actually one of the crawlers had identified the Horace as a female, of about what passed for middle age if you were an alien. That would take a bit of getting used to though, a female Horace. Dora steered the Gecko to the right at the top of the ramp, keeping well out of the way as their Bio-Bots firmly but carefully led the captured Horace down the ramp.

"I see it now, a big green is attacking Five." Said Dora. "I didn't think there were any of those left, we haven't seen any in months."

"Makes you wonder what else is inside some of the alien buildings Biff."

"You need to hurry; we've enemy flyers coming in over Whitby."

The voice over their comms was one of the Fifty West teams in charge of keeping the APC protected. Told to keep quiet unless there was a severe threat.

"Use any means available to keep them off us." Said Dora.

"Will do."

It was that game again....Would the aliens sacrifice the five or six of their own kind still in the building, to bomb them out of existence. The aliens ruled the air over Britain and the rest of the planet. The game was definitely rigged in their favour.

"I'm going to take out the big green." She said. "Literally.... He's going out of the back wall."

Big Greens were about eight feet tall and looked very lizard like. Not that intelligent, but incredibly tough and brutal. Huge numbers of them had landed in the early days of the invasion to soften up Earth's defences and protect the first alien structures. They used to terrify Dora, though now she was trying to carefully knock it away from Five. She put the Gecko's claw between Five and the big green and sort of swatted it, just a friendly little tap. The tap left the big green lying some distance away.

"Poor thing, it's confused....Geckos are supposed to be on his side." She muttered.

Now she was doing it, assigning gender willy-nilly. She ran at the brute before it could get up, holding it tight in the Gecko's front legs. Through the wall she took it, crushing it under her as they hit the ground. Not that a fall from the first floor was going to kill a big green.

"Enemy flyers will be overhead in one minute."

"Use everything we have, we're not losing this Horace." Said Ish.

It would have been nice to take her time, being a huge killing machine for a while was fun, far better than any computer game. She bit with the Gecko's huge jaws, almost biting the big green in two. Still not enough to kill it, so she bit into its neck and twisted. As the reptilian head came away from the body, she knew the big green was dead. A delicate bite deep into the body and she had the creature's power pack, they could be really useful.

"Flyers overhead.....I repeat, we have company."

"And a few small greens are blocking the exit I want to use." Said Ish. "Can you deal with them Biff."

"On my way."

She felt the vibrations as the heavy disruptor on the roof of the APC came to life. They had other electrical and electro-magnetic weapons, if they chose to use them. It was stand-off time again, wondering if an alien AI would decide to bomb them and accept the deaths of several Horaces as a fair exchange for killing them. Dora had much the same mindset as Ish, there was nothing she could do to affect the outcome of the game, the weird standoff. She began to use the Gecko's jaws to kill the group of small greens who were between the captured Horace and their trucks.

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Kitty McLaren had been a civilian pilot before being selected by the British Space Programme. She'd flown the big stuff, the huge aircraft that could cross the globe to deliver people or freight. Being trained as a lunar shuttle pilot had sounded like a dream come true, though the reality had never lived up to the dream. Lunar shuttles were just ferries to bring people and supplies to Base Albion. Most runs didn't even require a pilot unless something really bizarre went wrong. The onboard AI on the British shuttles wasn't as clever as the one used by the Chinese, but it got the job done. She didn't like to admit it, but there had been occasions when the AI had landed the shuttle while she'd been half asleep....No, actually she'd been hard asleep. There was no pride in being able to do her job with a hangover. Being a Fifth West pilot was different, they expected her to be able to fly anything and so far at least, she hadn't let them down.

"Looks like you're stuck in Norway McLaren." Said Gene. "So am I for that matter, the aliens have put another detector tower up on the coast"

Gene Lindine had a few extra scars since the aliens had dropped two bunker busting bombs on the Fifty West Norwegian Base. The ground invasion they'd been expecting had never arrived, though there was no guarantee it was never going to show up.

"Shit....Where did they build a tower this time?" She asked.

"This one is huge, going by what the patrol reported and it's right in the centre of Tromsø."

"I'll go crazy stuck here forever."

"It's not that bad McLaren, and I'm sure the Tech Team can keep you busy."

Everyone called her McLaren apart from her mother and a few very special friends and most of them were probably dead by now. She was helping Gene put up a better barrier between the freezing cold crater where one of the bombs had hit and the interior of Hangar Two.

"My thumbs are cold, even with gloves on." She said.

"Just one more sheet of plywood and we might keep the temperature in the hangar above freezing by a degree or two."

The repairs had to be fairly primitive and built inside the part of the base which had been hit.

Anything too elaborate and it might be seen by a passing saucer drone and the high altitude bombers might be back. They were also trying to keep activity in the upper floors to a minimum.

"Pop rivets....." Said Kitty. "We're repairing a high tech science base with plywood and pop rivets."

"I had a car once..... Held together with....."

Banter was one thing, it was the way they survived. Gene had probably realised that banter had become genuine pissed off at some point in her life. She was a pilot, a damned good one. Now she was beyond simply cold and worried her fingers might never stop being numb. One of the security guys had recently lost two toes to frostbite. Gene thumped her on the shoulder.

"Pizza after we finish, my treat."

"All the food is free anyway."

"I have a decent bottle of wine to wash it down."

Decent to Gene tended to mean anything that had a proper cork rather than a screw top lid on it. Still, it sounded better than any alternatives she could think of.

"Fine.....You drill the holes and I'll pop the rivets." She said.

Lazy tongs they were called and Kitty quite enjoyed using them to fix huge pop rivets in place. The first alien bomb had landed at the bottom of a valley a good distance from the base, the aliens didn't seem that good at high altitude bombing. The resulting crater was gradually filling with ice and water, turning itself into a small lake. Kitty thumped the plywood and liked the solid sound it produced.

“Hear that ? When I pop rivet.....Things stay riveted.” She said.

“I could have done with you when I repaired that old classic car.”

The aliens had only dropped two bombs, the second had hit the side of Hangar Two and a room used as a break room by the night patrols. They’d lost three guards in the attack and two highly skilled technicians. After that, they’d begun to avoid any activity on the surface.

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Inka Malovic had been tipped the wink as they say, informed by a friend of a friend that a new Horace had been captured and would soon be arriving. She and her two children were stood by the inner blast doors of the research lab, trying to keep out of everyone’s way.

“They’ll be here in five minutes.” Rick Piotroski told her.

Rick was the head of IT, the systems people who looked after the computer systems of the campus.

“Thank you, the children are so excited.”

She heard Kata sigh and knew what was coming.

“I’m not a child mum.”

No she wasn’t and Inka was all too aware of that. Her daughter was now seventeen and still officially dating Darius. Her daughter was pretty, very pretty. She was also fickle and had at least one other young man she was seeing. Inka often said she wondered where Kata got it from, but she did know where. She’d had the same fickle nature right up until she’d settled down with the father of her children.

“They’re not going to hurt this one are they mum ?” Asked Antun.

“No, they know how to look after this Horace.”

Her son Antun was fourteen and more interested in computer games than girls, though Inka knew that would soon change.

“Will you be alright, I have a meeting ?” Asked Rick. “Just keep a safe distance from the trucks unless you’re told it’s safe. Pandora said they’re only a few minutes away.”

“Yes, we’ll be fine.” Said Inka.

There was a tunnel behind the blast doors, which led to another set of blast doors some distance from the main campus. It was all part of the vast hangar system that would one day open up, allowing a fleet of vessels to take mankind to a new home in the stars. At least that was what Andy Korenberg had told them when they’d arrived. They shouldn’t have been allowed into where they were, but Rick had got them through the various security checks.

“I can hear them...I can hear the trucks.” Said Antun.

The blast doors began to open, moving back into recesses in the walls. By the time they were fully open Inka could hear the sound of several vehicles approaching.

“Will they stop here mum ?” Asked Kata.

“Pandora said they would if they could.”

If there no casualties who needed urgent treatment, though Inka wasn’t going to say that to her kids. They were already growing up too fast in a variety of ways. The APC came out of the tunnel first, the fumes from its powerful engines caught in her throat.

“Wow, the Gecko is awake..... I think.” Said Antun.

It wasn’t, which wasn’t a disappointment for Inka. She’d seen the huge brute in the research pens and it scared her. It was either asleep or powered down. Either way it didn’t move as the low loader it was on went past. Two more trucks went past with Ish’s converted Bio-Bots on the back. There were less of them than when they’d left, a lot less. Inka was torn between thinking less of them was a good thing or a bad thing. She didn’t trust the alien abominations and never would.

“Oh..... Here he comes mum....I can see him.” Said Kata.

“It’s a she Kata, Rick told me they’d captured a female.”

“You can’t have a female Horace, that’s silly.” Said Antun.

The final truck at the rear of the convoy, Inka could see Pandora waving at her. She and Ish were shouting something, but the noise of the truck engines was drowning it out. The open back truck containing Horace pulled up right in front of her, the engines pumping out smoke that hurt her eyes.

“Come on get onboard.” Shouted Ish. “You can come with us to the pens.”

The tailboard of the truck was down, lots of eager hands waiting to help them climb up. Inka had never been that close to one of the aliens before, less than a yard away on the back of a truck. It looked like a huge long maggot on tiny legs, lots of tiny legs. Like the original Horace, metal spheres were attached to it by tubes that penetrated its body.

“Don’t touch it Kata.” Said Dora. “Not until it gets to know you.”

“Is it really a girl ?” Asked her daughter.

“Yes, it is.” Said Dora.

There was a smell coming from the creature, something sweet mixed with something unpleasant, like candyfloss trying to compete with the smell of mildew. It was too much for Inka, she wanted to escape. Impossible now, the tailboard was back in place, the truck was moving again.

“Did you have to fight the aliens ?” Asked Antun.

“We did, even some of their aircraft turned up.” Said Dora. “We pointed our weapons at them and they pointed theirs at us.”

“What happened ?”

“I think we scared them Antun, they flew away.”

Inka noticed Ish was feeding the new Horace with a handful of dried pellets. He was actually feeding the monster out of his bare hands. He must have noticed her watching.

“Feeding is a universal sign you mean a creature no harm.” He said. “It should settle her down quite a bit. No one is going to feed you if they mean to kill you.”

There was that dreadful sickly sweet smell again. Her kids seemed the happiest they’d been in months, but it was all too much for Inka. She leant over the side of the truck and threw up.

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