

## Ishmael II : Pandora

### Chapter 9 - Vicky

**“It was strange to hug Vicky Meadows goodbye, though he did it anyway. He stood and watched her and her children vanish into the ruins of the city, while Bren expertly headed the Eleanor down the river.”**



Tyler Bates knew his children were far better at staying hidden than he was. They were quicker too, when the need arose and they knew the area like the back of their hands. It made no logical sense for him to be backing up Tirsra rather than her brother. It was just that he hated sending the kids out to do something that put their lives at risk more than the usual perils of post invasion Britain. He was the man of the house, so he needed to keep his daughter safe. There was also the fact that searching the tank had been his idea.

“No cover at the front, but Zane and I hide behind it all the time.” Said Tirsra. “Once we get crouched down, no one can see us.”

The tank had been there since almost the start of the invasion. Part of a failed attempt by the army to drive the aliens out of that part of Kent. There were scorch marks on the outside, but Tirsra had put her head inside a few times and there was no sign of a fire. Best of all, no alien creatures seemed to be waiting inside.

“Have you looked inside it recently ?” He asked.

“A few weeks ago....I can throw a stone inside and see if anything reacts.”

“Good idea.”

They’d discussed looting the tank during the night, but they knew the alien creatures that looked like humans tended to prowl around after dark. A sunny day, with the abandoned tank in the centre of the Town Hall steps. Tyler didn’t think there was a more exposed location in what was left of the town. The problem was that if the aliens decided to destroy the rest of the town, the tank would be gone and there was no telling what treasures it might hold. At one time his kids would have made a game out of looting the tank. They’d have rattled a couple of shopping trolleys up the Town Hall steps. That was before the smarter bots had arrived and half the town had been demolished. They’d both brought backpacks and would carry anything too large to go in the packs.

“I’ll throw it inside and then hide behind the tank.” Said Tirsra, while holding half a broken brick.

His daughter had been a little clumsy once, definitely not likely to be asked to join a dance class. She wasn’t clumsy now though. She moved quietly and at speed, before clambering up the side of the tank with ease. The sound as the brick hit the inside was loud, far louder than he’d expected. Tyler watched as his daughter hid, though nothing came to investigate the noise.

“Here we go.” He muttered.

By the time he was on top of the tank, looking in the open hatch, Tirsra was with him. Safety meant staying hidden, so he dropped inside the vehicle, with Tirsra following him. Quite dark away from the hatchway, darker than he’d hoped. They’d brought candles, but had hoped not to need them.

“I was worried we might find dead soldiers.” Said Tirsra.

“The army pulling out was organised, I’m sure they buried their dead.”

One of the officers who’d been a doctor had helped Tonya, though that now felt like it had all happened a lifetime ago. No cure for whatever illness killed her, but the army doctor had given them

morphine to ease their daughter's pain. Tyler lit two candles and looked around the inside of the tank. Lots of signs of neglect, dirt and spider's webs everywhere. No sign of looting though, or that any alien creature had been there.

"I never realised how cramped these things are." He said.

"Look, I think these flaps open up."

Tirsa opened the slit windows the driver must have looked through and instantly there was just enough light to see the entire interior of the tank, though they'd still need the candles in places.

"Hmmm lots of shells for the big gun." He muttered.

They began to open the various boxes that lined the inside, with Tirsa finding the first thing worth taking.

"A whole box full of ration packs." She said. "Bound to be out of date."

"Army ration packs will last until a year after the end of the world." He said. "Keep them in the metal box, I'll carry that back."

The real find was almost by accident, as he went to the rear of the vehicle.

"Damned cobwebs....Keep walking into them." He muttered.

Even dads could have a slight fear of spiders and Tyler energetically used his hands to wipe the webs off his face. In doing so, he also hit a rack on the wall. He hit it so hard that his finger stung, which caused him to look at the rack.

"Tirsa.....I've found two assault rifles back here." He said.

Probably the latest model the army had, it was amazing they'd been left behind. Covered in dust and webs of course, the tank had been open to the elements for quite some time. The rifles alone made the risks of looting the tank worth it.

"Wow, they look lethal." Said Tirsa.

"They are, a friend who used to be in the army said one of these on automatic, can cut a car in half. Now we can really deal with the big alien creatures. There has to be more ammunition for them.....Please let there be a box of ammo."

There was, an entire metal box full of it. Maybe not enough to fight a prolonged war, but more than enough to take care of the occasional unwanted night time prowler.

"We're going to have a lot to carry." He said. "Look for their medical kit though, I'll gladly come back for that if I have to."

"I already looked, the medical box has been emptied."

"I guess that sums up an army after defeat....Leave the weapons and grab the first aid kit."

Everything did just about fit in their packs, though they'd have a heavy metal box each to carry. Tyler put one of the assault rifles over his shoulder and hung onto the second one. He looked at an expectant daughter for a while, before offering her the weapon.

"It's not a magic wand Tirsa, it won't make you invulnerable. You'll still need to be very careful."

"I know dad, I'm not stupid."

"And no letting Zane get his hands on it."

"Dad ! I'm nineteen now....Not nine."

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"We'll still have to rely on the AI to make guesses." Said Ish. "Her vocabulary is pretty good, but nowhere near the average twenty thousand words of an adult English speaker. It'll be like talking to one of the postgrad engineering guys."

"That bad huh ?"

She'd know what he meant, lots of replacing words with grunts and weird spacing of words. It often amazed Ish that people who could build just about anything, seemed to reduce everything to a few grunts and 'Oks, whatever and alrights.' When he thought about it, talking to Horace via the synthesiser linked to the AI was probably going to be easier. He turned on all the equipment and hoped Horace didn't choose that morning to be awkward.

"Good morning Horace." He said.

"Good morning Ish....Good morning Biff."

The delay was still there, but their conversations were becoming more fluid with every new word Horace learned.

"She called me Biff."

"The AI will have chosen that from listening to us. I can change it if you want?" He asked.

"No, leave it."

At one time Horace would have thought their mutterings were part of the conversation with her. Now the extremely clever AI had worked out what to feed into the synthesiser. It didn't always get it right, but there wasn't time to get everything totally right.

"Thank you Horace, your ideas for filtering the green gas worked well." Said Dora.

"I am pleased."

"We need to go further." Said Ish. "Help us create an antidote to the green death."

Horace began to go from side to side on her large number of small legs. It seemed to be the alien's way of pacing about the room, or a nervous twitch. She was stressed at being asked to help an enemy against her own people and he could understand that.

"You have our word, nothing you tell us will be used against your people." Said Ish.

"We just want to leave this planet and find a new home." Added Biff.

The AI was underlining a couple of words on the screen in yellow, though it was still giving the conversation a green tick. If the technology was right, Horace should have understood.

"Have you found a new home?" Asked Horace.

"We think so, yes." Said Ish.

More rocking from side to side, he could hear her feet hitting the tiled floor of her pen. The way the aliens ate was remarkably similar to the large animals of Earth. Their eyes saw in the same wavelengths of light, though Horace did communicate at very low frequencies. Now it seemed they could feel stress. All in all, and despite their truly alien look.....

"There is more that is similar about us, than is different." Said Ish. "We mean you no harm....Please help us."

"What will you do with me when you leave this planet?" Asked Horace.

What would they do with her? Personally Ish was quite happy to let her go, but there were a lot of military Fifth West people who were certain to have other ideas.

"What do you want us to do with you?" Asked Biff.

"Leave me close to one of our larger buildings and once you're at a safe distance, I will call for help."

"We can do that." Said Biff.

They probably could, though it might mean JV leaving them behind when the great fleet of Diaspora Valkyrie ships left Earth and headed towards a new home.

"I feel a need to tell you that I can sense a lie from Ish." Said Horace. "He has been altered in some way, I can see his emotions. I need Ish to promise you'll let me go before you leave."

Oh crap, it was going to mean being the bad guy of Fifth West again. Ish looked at Biff and nodded and she nodded back. At least if it all went wrong, they'd be trudging through the ruins of Earth together.

"I give you my word Horace. I will make sure you're released before we go."

"Thank you."

"In the current mood for honesty." Said Biff. "We did record you one night. We are aware that you have arms which are capable of using our tools."

"Good, you knowing that means I can help you properly."

"So you will help us?" Asked Ish.

"I will, though there won't be time to explain everything. I can help you to produce an antidote, but you will need to trust me. Something swallowed."

"We call those pills." Said Biff.

"Yes, I can give you the formula for a pill. You'll hate me, it will make you feel quite unwell. I promise you, it will clear the green death from your bodies."

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Bren Grundy, formerly a technician with the British Army, tried to stand up. The creature holding her down so that she was having to kneel hadn't really hurt her, but it wasn't going to let her stand up. Their packs and weapons were in a heap nearby, with one of the brutes still picking through their stuff. He'd sometimes mutter something to the one Elaheh called the Queen of the Devils. The Queen seemed to have almost forgotten about them. From what she'd overheard, Bren had a pretty good idea that the Queen's warriors were looking for something in the ruins of Pontianak.

"No...Look again Fünfte. We're not leaving without it." Said the Queen.

"Yes Vicky."

Vicky seemed a strange name for the fierce looking female, though Bren was getting used to the weird and wonderful things she'd seen since the start of the invasion. Vicky was definitely female, there were two lines of nipples going down her belly. Probably a vagina too, if her long prehensile tail wasn't covering it. Tough creatures, Bren had seen Matt shoot one with the shotgun, without giving it as much as a scratch. Queen Vicky was becoming a little agitated.

"Where is it? Who has it Siebte?"

"I'm not sure....One of Fünfte's children found it in the north of the city."

Whatever they'd been looking for had been found, Vicky finally took the time to take an interest in them. A wave of one of her clawed hands and they were allowed to stand up. Nothing to stop them making a try for their weapons, it was almost an insult. It was obvious that the Queen and her Devils had no fear of them.

"Don't do anything stupid, I have no intention of harming you." Said Vicky. "You're just in the wrong place at the wrong time. When we leave some of my family will escort you to your boat."

"How is it that you speak English?" Asked Bren.

"It is the language of my birth....We must leave this place now, they will bomb it soon. They watch you see....Too much activity in one place and the bombs begin to fall. Take your things, my daughter Drei and her fighters will go with you."

It seemed strange to be allowed to pick up their weapons and packs, considering Matt had fired at one of them. Once they were outside the ruined building, Vicky spent a minute or so in conversation with one of warriors. A male, Bren was beginning to notice which ones had nipples and which didn't. None of the creatures had any clothing at all, or visible weapons. It seemed that immense strength and sharp teeth were the only weapons they needed.

"A change of plans, you might be useful.....Might be." Said Vicky. "I will accompany you to your boat. Some of my kin will go ahead and find fuel for your vessel."

"It requires marine diesel fuel." Said Matt.

"I know, one of the staff at the Chinese Mao Zedong Base was a boat fanatic. What he knew.....I now know."

That was it, no further explanation of how Vicky had learned what she knew. Matt led their group with Queen Vicky's warriors forming a defensive shield all around them. Bren hated to admit it, but she hadn't felt as safe anytime in the last two or three years. At least walking with Vicky and her people gave an opportunity to ask a few questions.

"Why do your warriors call you Vicky?" Asked Bren.

"I was born human like you. My full name is, or rather was Vicky Meadows, though I haven't given anyone my full name in a very long time."

Bren didn't sense any hostility towards her, just indifference. Vicky might have thought of a way for them to be useful to her, but otherwise..... She didn't seem to think they were worth worrying about. That made Bren a little angry.

"Come on Vicky, tell me about it." She said. "What the hell happened to you?"

Doug actually gasped as she asked the question. Vicky might have answered if the aliens hadn't decided to bomb the wrecked government building at that moment, the one where Vicky had been holding court in the basement. They hadn't travelled far from the building, but luckily a turn in the river put another building between them and the bombing. For a couple of minutes the entire world seemed to consist of the loud explosions and clouds of smoke and debris. When it all ended, Vicky began to head downriver again, as though nothing had happened.

"They're bombing is devastating, but predictable." Said Vicky. "Now.....How the hell did I end up like this? It all began one morning in the Mordor Two Moon Base, when I was bitten by a mouse....."

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Luis Lopez had noticed it; the way just a few decent meals and a couple of nights in a proper bed, had vastly improved his wife's ability to walk. He knew himself that cold and damp caused his hips to ache and he didn't have a family history of arthritis. He wasn't that keen on the Kingdom of Devon and Cornwall, with its soldiers in home altered uniforms, but, and it was a big but, he knew that Jada would have a better life with them. Actually, he didn't feel suited to a life among the ruins either.

"Commander Archer was right, their food is good." He said.

"I love scrambled eggs." Said Maria.

"A good breakfast.....If only they hadn't run out of tea." Said Jada.

Everyone laughed and even Jada joined in. They all knew that Steve had misgivings, but surely the citizens of the new West Country Kingdom, wouldn't look after them so well if they meant them harm. Besides, as even Steve had to admit, there was nowhere else for them to go.

"I volunteered to help with the crabbing today." Said Daisy. "I've no idea what that entails, but I do love fresh crab meat."

"I'm going too." Added Steve.

"A lazy day on the beach sounds fun to me." Said Alejandro.

There was something going on in front of the counter where everyone queued up to get their food served on metal plates. Archer was there, along with two other men in the now familiar uniforms with personalised touches. They were pulling a cable across the serving hatch, a cable attached to a huge microphone.

"Is this thing on?" Asked Archer.

His amplified words bounced off the walls, causing little Maria to put her hands over her ears. Archer actually chuckled like someone's favourite uncle. There was something though, a constant feeling that their change of fortunes was too good to be true. Of course it might be just that Steve's paranoia was contagious.

"I've some good news." Said Archer. "It was thought all the boats had waited in Jersey for the storm to abate. Our communications aren't perfect in bad weather and it appears some boats weathered the storm near Newquay. I'm pleased to tell you they will be here before dark."

There was a lot of cheering, Luis even found himself joining in. Archer didn't tap the side of a glass to get attention, he banged two metal plates together.

"The crews will need to rest and there will be the usual maintenance and provisioning of the boats. But unless we find major problems, you will all begin your journey to Jersey in two day's time."

"Excellent news." Someone yelled.

It appeared someone in Jessica Chase's family was keen to be heard. They shouted something at Archer, but Luis couldn't hear what.

"Yes.....I know some of you are waiting for other family members to arrive. Let us know who you are and as long as it's not too many, you can wait here for the next regular transport to Saint Aubin."

"Where do we go after Jersey?" Someone yelled.

"Yes, about time we knew." Yelled Jessica Chase.

"You will be told the final destination when you get to Jersey." Said Archer. "I would remind you that there are no locks on your doors, no guard towers on the gates. If you're unhappy here, you may leave at any time."

That was it, Archer left someone else to ignore the questions as the microphone was pushed through the serving hatch and vanished.

"Well.... He went from favourite uncle to evil step dad pretty quickly." Said Steve.

"We could say we're waiting for someone and stay here for another two weeks or so." Said Alejandro. "If we're still not sure I mean."

"You stay if you want to, I'm going to Jersey." Said Jada.

"Think how nice it must be there." Said Tracy.

"Or the Kingdom of Devon and Cornwall might have reinvented serfdom." Said Steve. "I haven't seen any pictures of happy smiling people on Jersey, have any of you?"

Only Daisy looked worried, everyone else was glaring at Steve, including a few people sat at the next table.

"Looks like you're outvoted Steve." Said Luis. "And besides.....We don't want to be seen as troublemakers."

Deep down Luis was concerned too, it was all too good to be true. Jersey might not turn out to be a paradise, he was aware of that possibility. There was simply no other sensible option.

"Fine.....Come on Daisy, let's go crabbing." Said Steve.

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Inka Malovic wasn't happy with the news, or the way Deb Newman kept grinning at her. Kata seemed happy, so that was one less thing to worry about. A little of her daughter's blood had been put in an analyser and it appeared Kata was going to be the first new mother in a baby boom Deb had been forecasting for a while.

"Sorry to be so enthusiastic." Said Deb. "It's just that I knew this moment would come. A lot of relatively young people with a dwindling supply of contraceptives. You're the first Kata, top of the list."

"I'm sure Darius will be pleased....We were so careful though." Said Kata.

"Every time ?" Asked Inka.

"Yes mum, of course. No one will be told though will they ? I don't want to be on a list on a wall or anything."

"No, sorry....Forgive my overenthusiasm." Said Deb. "Everything will be confidential, though I will need to inform Francine. She will of course need to let the shuttle people know, so they can take a child into account when allocating space."

"Oh, so many people. Do you need to tell them right away ?" Asked Kata.

"With all the smiles I assumed.....We're making up our own rules now Kata." Said Deb. "No one should have to carry on with an unwanted pregnancy. Do you want to have this baby ?"

"Yes I do. It's just that.....I don't want people to know right away." Said Kata.

"My daughter just wants a little privacy." Added Inka.

"Then she shall have it. We've had a few problems with the Autodocs since the invasion, they're no longer getting updates from the Department of Health. So you'll be getting me for all the regular checkups, scans and routine tests. So....If we book you in for your first scan in eleven weeks time, will you be happy for Francine to know then ?"

"Will I be able to see a scan of my baby ?"

"Yes, in full glorious colour. I will even be able to print you off a few copies."

"Brilliant." Said Kata. "Then, if everything is alright. I don't mind people knowing."

"Aren't you at least going to tell Darius ?" Asked Inka.

"No mum, not for a while..... And don't tell Antun, he'll tell everyone."

"Don't worry Kata, we have the same resources as a large hospital." Said Deb. "Even without the Autodocs, we have a very skilled medical team."

Inka understood why her daughter wanted to delay the big announcement. So many terrible things had happened since the aliens had arrived. Kata just wanted to make sure the baby she carried was alright, before she made a huge song and dance about it.

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The story of how Vicky Meadows had become the Queen of the Devils had kept Matt Newman enthralled. It had been a long trudge back to the Eleanor, yet he seemed to do most of it on autopilot, as he listened to stories of Fifth West off world research and contaminated DNA.

"I'm no expert Vicky." He said. "It seems to me though, that Fifth West were trying to create something like you. A human-alien hybrid capable of defeating an alien invasion."

"Yes, you're right and my strange encounter with an aggressive mouse is only part of the story. Dimitri Minasyan was the brains behind it all, though the mouse didn't pick up everything he knew. There's mouse in my DNA along with the human and alien dominant parts. Other things too, strange bits of mollusc DNA that Minasyan added for some reason. There was also some dinosaur added to the final mix. It appears there were intelligent dinosaurs with opposable thumbs. All of it went in the pot to create.....Me, and my children. They're multiplying now, my children, at a staggering rate. I really do think we can clear the aliens from at least South East Asia."

"I will tell them you're not our enemy." Said Matt. "The Fifty West people I mean, the armies of the world are probably all gone by now. But if I do get back to Britain, I will make sure they know you're fighting the alien invasion."

"I need to tell you.....Perhaps the girl could go back on the boat ? It is safe, my children have made sure your boat has no unwanted guests." Said Vicky.

"Alright, I'll take her, you can have your private little chat." Said Doug.

Elaheh waved at Vicky and to his amusement, Vicky waved back.

“Be careful picking up people on the way Matt.” Said Vicky. “You seem to have chosen well, but we have knowledge of new human looking robots who aren’t easy to spot. Facial expressions, body heat....No body odour though...Which is worth remembering.”

“We will, thank you.” Said Bren.

“Your vessel is refuelled now and ready to go, we’ve even given you a box of food gathered from the few stores that remain intact.” Said Vicky. “I asked the girl to go, so I can tell you a dreadful truth. My children and their children, have fed on the bodies of dead humans. We don’t kill your kind, but we are now many and the flesh of the alien creatures has little nutritional value. Please tell them when you get to Britain, tell them we’re not your enemy....I just wanted to tell you the whole truth.”

“I can see why you’d.....It’s still disturbing.” Said Bren.

“Just don’t kill people and we’ll be alright.” Said Matt. “I meant to ask you....What were you looking for in Pontianak ? Why did you come here ?”

“We came to teach the aliens to fear us. As for what we wanted to find....They have a powerful communications device to control their robots in battle. Nothing may come of it, though I hope to be able to use it against them. We have a lot of scientific skills learned in ways you probably don’t want to hear about.”

“I’m sure I don’t.” Said Matt.

It was strange to hug Vicky Meadows goodbye, though he did it anyway. He stood and watched her and her children vanish into the ruins of the city, while Bren expertly headed the Eleanor down the river.

“Wow, they’ve given us fresh bread.”

He heard Elaheh yell in delight as he went to join her in looking through the goodies Vicky’s people had found for them.

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It had all started with Tina dragging him out of bed early, on a day when he really had fancied grabbing an extra hour of sleep. Mateo Lopez could make out something about a pig, as his daughter pulled at his arm.

“It’s friendly dad, it likes being stroked.”

“Oh, where have been now ?” He asked.

“It’s a pig dad, a really big one. I thought it might be....Useful.”

His daughter began to pull at the sheets and Mateo remembered he’d gone to bed naked. It was interesting that Helen and him went to bed naked quite often now. Far more often than they did before the world went crazy.

“Oi, stop pulling at me Tina.”

“Beat her.....We need to start beating her.” Called Helen from the kitchen.

“I just might.....Go on evil child, go and annoy your mother while I get dressed.”

The same clothes as the day before went back on, he was getting used to the idea of having a slight odour most of the time. Helen talked about them turning into a family of Vikings and he thought they all probably had a bit of an odour too. The only part of his hygiene ritual left from the pre-invasion days was cleaning his teeth. Looted shops with nothing left on the shelves would often have toothpaste and toothbrushes, if you looked hard enough. When he worked for the council it took him at least ninety minutes to get ready for the day. Now he was in the kitchen ten minutes after his daughter had woken him up.



"Your daughter wants a pig now." Said Helen. "As if the chickens aren't already eating us out of house and home."

"My daughter ! I thought the fairies left her on our doorstep."

"It'll eat the food scraps." Said Tina.

"We don't have food scraps dear daughter." Said his wife. "We have leftovers, which we eat the next day."

"It has a collar." Said Tom. "The pig.....It has collar."

Normally Tom just got down to the business of eating at breakfast time. For him to join in with the conversation was rare enough to grab everyone's attention.

"It sounds like someone's pet." Said Helen.

"Where did you find it ?" He asked.

"There's an orchard near to where we found the chickens. He was digging about in there. He let me pet him and everything. Tom even stroked him."

"I did." Confirmed her brother.

The orchard was a long way from Big Town, definitely beyond the range the kids were supposed to go scavenging. That argument was for another day though. Mateo found himself getting quite excited about the chance of adding a pig to their livestock, though he had to get one thing straight with his kids.

"Alright we'll go and look for this pig." He said. "But like the chickens it will not be a pet. Pigs have only one use if you live off the land.....It will provide meat to help us through the winter. Does everyone understand that ?"

"Yes dad." Said Tina.

"Ok." From Tom.

There was that look in their eyes, they both hoped he'd fall in love with the pig and spare its life. He couldn't though, they really didn't have enough food scraps to feed an animal that large right through the winter.

"I had an aunt who cured her own bacon." Said Helen.

Of course she did, his wife seemed to be an expert on just about everything in the countryside, despite never mentioning any of it during many years of marriage.

"It's agreed then, we'll go pig hunting after breakfast." Said Mateo.

"Am I invited ?" Asked Helen.

"Of course.... What would we do without our shield maiden and her trusty machete. We'll go out as a family, fully equipped, I'll bring the shotgun."

No doors to lock when they left, just close the back door and set off heading a little east of north.

Not that they had a compass, they all knew the sun rose in the east and set in the west. Even on a cloudy morning Mateo knew where north was and it wasn't cloudy. The sun was shining and the kids were looking forward to having a pig as a new pet.

"Have fun but stay alert." Said Helen.

The pig had probably gone wild...Though if his kids had been able to pet it. Suddenly he remembered something he had thought of, before the idea had left his mind.

"Damn, we'll need to go back." He said. "We need rope to use as a lead."

"I remembered, I've rope in my backpack." Said Helen. "Along with the small first aid kit and a flashlight.....You never know where we might end up."

Mateo was beginning to think his wife was the reincarnation of one of those Victorian women who travelled to Africa with just a servant and an elephant gun. They had to cross two country lanes that

were in the process of being reclaimed by nature. There was also a point where his entire family ended up with soggy boots and trainers, while crossing a small stream. All of it made Mateo realise how far his kids were roaming on a routine basis.

"This is too far to scavenge Tina." He said. "I'm not joking....Suppose one of you was seriously hurt. No more coming this far or I will start to keep you in the house all day."

"Sorry dad, but.....We did find the pig." Said Tom.

Tina was the real problem of course and she was just glaring at him.

"At least leave a note to say where you've gone." Said Helen.

Which just watered down his threats and didn't really help at all. It took quite some time to find the right part of the old farm and of course, the pig had probably wandered about since the kids had been there. The pig was still in an overgrown neglected orchard, but a different one.

"There he is !" Yelled Tina.

It was a big pig, though Mateo was only certain of its sex once he'd had a chance to look at the back end of the animal. It was busy munching at a pile of windfall apples that didn't look that appetising.

"He seems friendly enough." Said Helen, as she stroked the beast.

"Definitely a boy." Said Mateo.

"Dad !" Said Tina.

Mateo stroked the animal and when the pig didn't try to bite him, he tied the rope through his collar. There was a brass tag on the collar, which he had to lean in close to read. It meant trusting the huge beast, but the pig just carried on munching the rotting apples.

"It appears our new friend here is called Otis." He said.

"Otis.....I like that." Said Tom.

"Good boy Otis." Said Tina, as she stroked him.

If the beast knew his name, he showed no signs of recognising it. The problem came when Mateo pulled on the rope and the pig refused to budge.

"He likes the windfall apples." Said Mateo. "Collect a few of the better looking fruit, we might have to bribe him to leave the orchard."

"I'll get them." Said Tina.

Tom helped him pull the rope, but the pig probably weighed far more than Mateo and he had four legs on the ground to brace himself.

"No good Tom, we need those apples."

It was just good fortune that caused him to watch his daughter as she ran towards a pile of fallen fruit that didn't look too rotten. There was someone there, perhaps another child. No, it was someone as big as an adult, though they were kneeling. Helen must have seen them too.

"Careful honey.....You should come back here." She shouted.

There was something wrong about the person beginning to stand up, their head looked a little too large. Alarm bells were sounding in Mateo's head, though he had no clear idea why. He brought up the shotgun and aimed it at the person who was now standing. There was something.....Their stance wasn't quite right.

"Stop where you are Tina." He shouted. "Stand still !"

She wouldn't stop he knew that, she probably hadn't heard him. His daughter was a little hyperactive, she'd once even had to see someone about it. All she'd be hearing were the noises in her head, caused by the excitement of finding the pig.

"Who the hell is that ?.....Hey, who are you ?" Shouted his wife.

Mateo was still only fifty-fifty about thinking his daughter was in danger, the other person might well have been someone a bit slow on the uptake. His daughter was still running though and in a matter of seconds she'd be blocking his shot.

'Boom.....Boom.'

He fired the shotgun twice, aiming at the top of the person's chest. Male or female, he had no idea. He just knew that he'd rather shoot than risk them hurting Tina. Still they didn't fall over, so Mateo aimed at their face.

'Boom.'

They fell down just as Tina began to scream. The pig must have been owned by a farmer, he didn't seem at all bothered by the noise of the shotgun.

"Tom, grab the rope....We don't want to have to find him again."

"Yes dad."

Helen beat him to Tina, hugging their daughter to stop her from screaming. Mateo didn't want to look at the body on the ground, but forced himself to. Supposing he'd killed someone who was completely harmless.....

"Crap ! It's not a person." He said. "It's one of the alien robots."

There were no internal organs where he'd blown holes in the thing, just what looked like circuits and metal joints. Bits of it were still sparking and twitching. Eventually he'd use the threat of the dead robot to get Tina to finally stop roaming for miles. Not then though, his daughter was already terrified enough. He kissed the top of her head.

"Are you alright ?" He asked.

"Yes, what is it dad ?"

"An alien machine of some kind.....It's dead now."

There were a few apples on the ground that didn't look too bad. He picked one up and placed it in his daughter's hand.

"Come on Tina, it might take a bit of pulling and bribing.....But let's take our new pig home."

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