

## Ishmael II : Pandora

### Chapter 17 – Judy Gray

**“Everything was out of date of course, though the accepted rule was that tins were immortal and bottled water was good for at least five years. When Jada pulled off the lid on a tin of peaches, everyone joined in.”**



The rumours of its destruction were obviously untrue. It seemed that the aliens were clever enough to avoid wasting time and resources to destroy relics of a bygone age.

“The Keep dad, it’s still there.” Said Zane.

Rochester’s mighty Keep, built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the aftermath of the invasion of ten sixty-six. There were signs of burning, everything seemed to have suffered fire damage, even old castles. Tyler Bates shared a little of his son’s excitement, that the huge stone structure was still there. It was as if the castle was still guarding the Medway River.

“It’s where that gang attacked us.” Said Tirsa.

“We’ll avoid it and circle around to the north.” Said Tyler. “That gang might be gone, but someone is bound to be holed up there.”

“Someone unpleasant.” Added Liza.

It was just about the only structure still standing in the area, some gang was bound to be using it as their base. When they’d gone too close before, someone had fired a shotgun at them and shouted racist abuse. Tyler wasn’t going to risk that again.

“If there are just a few of them, we could take them.” Said Tirsa.

“I’m sure we could, but we’re just here to get those pills.” Said Tyler. “Besides, a place that size.....It’d be a hell of a job to keep warm in the winter.”

He was rewarded with a laugh from both of his kids. The truth was that they had the skill and weapons to deal with most of the half-starved gangs they might come across.

“Are we nearly there yet ?” Asked Zane.

A standard running joke from their first trudge across Kent, when Zane had been much younger and Tonya had still been alive. Their group laugh was as much about nostalgia, as it was about the joke.

“There, the ruined chimney.” Said Tirsa.

No telling what the building had once been, there were a lot of ruins in the area, some old and some quite recent. Tyler was no expert, but the ruined stone structure looked old, bushes had even taken root on the fallen chimney.

“Yeah, looks like the place alright.” Said Zane.

They’d made a kind of cave of the fallen chimney, whoever had brought the pallet there. Not a waterproof cave, the rain had left a puddle or two on the floor. They must have used a helicopter, there was no decent road anywhere close by.

“We’re not the first here.” Said Tirsa.

“I didn’t expect we would be.” Said Liza. “Just people like us, in need of the pills.”

A man and woman, with the woman pushing a plastic container into the man’s backpack. The rule tended to be, no sudden moves near strangers. Tyler wasn’t a believer in synchronicity, even if it had been directing him down a path for some time. For some reason his wife gasped and almost ran at the woman.

"Hey, I know you." Said Liza. "You're that journalist Judy Gray. You came and interviewed me a few times for an article on black culture in London."

"The changes in black culture in Britain, and it was a hell of a long time ago." Said Judy. "That piece sold to a major Sunday newspaper and bought me a new car. When such things mattered of course."

The two women hugged and there was a little sobbing. Tyler decided to examine the pallet and its assorted containers of little yellow pills. Nearly all the plastic containers had 100 written on them, though there were a few with 50 on the side. All sorts of containers, some still had labels for vitamins on the side, or hay fever remedies. An odd mix, but someone had taken the trouble to cover the whole pallet in two layers of plastic sheeting to keep them dry.

"I found some instruction sheets." Said Tirsa. "I'll grab a couple."

Others had been there; a few containers were in a pile on the floor. Tyler cut a fresh hole in the plastic and pulled out two containers of a hundred each.

"Two hundred should do us.....What do you think Liza, is that enough?"

"That should be plenty." Said Judy. "We were given a few by some people in Chatham. The instructions say one every six months, but one a year will do. They upset your guts....I mean really upset your guts, especially the kids'. They work though."

"Yeah, they're really good." Said the man with Judy.

"Take one now, your cough was worse this morning." Said Liza.

He put one container of the pills in his backpack, with another in Zane's. Tyler decided it was best to take too many rather than too few and he put another hundred in his daughter's pack, though not before swallowing one of the yellow pills. He didn't fancy travelling with bad guts, but his cough had been getting much worse. A few more people arrived to get some of the little yellow pills and most seemed just like them, decent people with kids and quite a few worries. It would have been nice to pick up a little gossip, but the men arrived who kept eyeballing his daughter far too much. A quick family discussion and Tyler was about to take his family south, in the hopes of finding a safe shelter for the night.

"Can we travel with you for a while?" Asked Judy.

"Yes, of course." Said Liza.

Two extra people, both armed. It made sense for them to travel together, as long as their new friends didn't expect to move in with them. He picked up a lot of the news about Judy from his wife, told to him as they walked some way in front of everyone else.

"That's not her husband Karl, he died two years ago." Said Liza. "That's Rod, who she met at a kind of commune near Ashford."

"Makes sense.....Finding someone I mean." He said. "It's not a good idea to travel alone."

"A bit quick I think.....Anyway her daughter Dora became a volunteer doctor and she hasn't seen her since the start of the war."

He'd always thought war was an odd choice of words, even though he'd said it himself. War implied two groups of people with a grievance, who'd decided to settle it by trying to slaughter one another. The aliens had simply arrived and systematically set about wiping out mankind. That wasn't war, that was genocide. Tyler's guts began to feel really bad as the rain began. Luckily, they found the large greenhouse before nightfall.

"This is where we stayed on the way.....I like it here." Said Tirsa.

Probably once a plant nursery with several rows of greenhouses. Nearly all the greenhouses had been broken, some were nothing but piles of broken glass and twisted metal. One was intact, they'd spent a night there, sheltering from rain, on the way to Rochester.

"I vote we risk a small fire." Said Tirsa.

"Oh yes." Said Trudy.

By the time the others were having a makeshift meal, Tyler was throwing up. His stomach felt like someone was twisting it into knots. Tirsa was busy reading the instructions for the pills, mainly to get an idea about anything to ease the pain.

"Useless thing.....Plenty of rest it says." Said Tirsa. "And drink plenty of fluids. It says that on everything vaguely medical. Hey Judy, what is your daughter's name."

"Dora, Pandora Gray.....Why ?"

Some claim synchronicity actually has a bright yellow aura, which those who have the sight could see. Not what some would call fate, synchronicity played a backseat role to freewill. Some died before reaching a crucial cusp in their life, or were dragged the wrong way by others. Like an understanding and forgiving mother, synchronicity picked up the pieces and did what could be done with what remained. If Tyler had possessed the sight, he'd have seen everyone in the greenhouse glowing with it.

"It's just that Pandora Gray is the name on the bottom of these instructions." Said Tirsa. "Along with someone called Ishmael McGrath."

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There was a certain going back to the days of sail, about navigating The Eleanor. They had a decent navigation system and charts, but nothing was ever as good as seeing a recognisable landmark. They'd used the main sea lanes all the way along the coast of Portugal, Spain and then France. Bren had even taken them further out into the Atlantic at one point, to avoid a massive super tanker that looked to be dead in the water. No engines, it was moving with the ocean currents. A massive hazard, she hadn't relaxed until it was a long way behind them.

"I know that headland." Said Matt. "We came here for a hiking holiday one summer. We're close to Brest in Norther France."

"We made good time; it was worth working on the engines." Said Doug.

The infamous Bay of Biscay was behind them and by a little skill and a lot of luck, they'd crossed it without any mishaps.

"We're alright for fuel." Said Bren. "Though a little more wouldn't hurt. A few extra tins of something or other wouldn't go amiss either. Do we have a look at Brest ? What does everyone think ?"

"Solid ground under my feet would be nice, even for just a few hours." Said Doug.

"We could have a look, couldn't we ?" Asked Ela. "If the place is a ruin we don't have to land there."

"No, we don't.....Take us in for a very careful look at Brest." Said Matt.

Sometimes Bren felt like saying Aye, Aye, Captain, using a pirate's voice. She'd spent years in the army, training to be a technician. Now she was Matt's lover and his first mate. Blindly following the man she loved, who had every intention of reuniting with his wife. If there had been any social media, she could have legitimately called her relationship status, complicated. It took a while to get close to Brest, they were all getting used to the patience required for travelling by sea.

"Crap ! The Naval Base took a pounding." Said Matt.

"It all looks to have happened a long time ago." Said Bren.

Bren felt like heading back out to sea, when she saw the wreck of a large naval ship. It had dug itself into the grassy coastline and must have once been the pride of the French navy. Now it was a burned-out carcass, with sea birds already beginning to lay claim to the best places to perch.

"Now that is a sad sight." Said Doug. "An aircraft carrier, the best they had."

“Did it have a name ?” Asked Ela.

“The Charles de Gaulle, they were always called The Charles de Gaulle.” Said Doug. “It looks to have been in one hell of a battle.”

“We did say we’d only go ashore for essentials.” Said Bren. “I have a bad feeling about this place and we have enough fuel to reach England.”

“Come on, we’re here now Bren.” Said Matt.

Three sets of appealing eyes told her she’d lose a vote on it. Bren carefully made her way towards the harbour. There were a lot more wrecked ships of all sizes, with one only just about visible, with just part of its mast sticking out of the water. It was a crazy place to come sightseeing, so she headed for the first Jetty that hadn’t been destroyed. Bren managed to get The Eleanor against the jetty, just behind what looked like a ferry, which was listing to one side.

“Alright, get your favourite weapons and an empty backpack.” Said Matt. “The crew of The Eleanor are going looting.”

“Aye, Aye, Captain.” Said Bren.

They laughed, after a second or two of staring at her.

“A Naval Base means weapons.” Said Matt. “For this trip decent weapons and ammunition are considered to be essentials.”

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Alejandro Lopez had felt a reluctance to the plan, and he felt that reluctance in the others too. Sat in the tunnels, planning to find a boat and run. Run from what ? They all loved their new home in Jersey, even Jada. Only Steve really wanted to leave and he’d never liked Jersey right back from day one. Alejandro had been thinking of starting a small rebellion, one based around staying in the beautiful hacienda on the hill.

“Just one bombing raid.” He’d told his wife, Tracy. “I wouldn’t mind betting our house was untouched. And the people here aren’t lazy, they’ll quickly recover and rebuild.”

“They’re just about to open another school.” Jada had added.

Any thought of rebellion vanished once they’d left the tunnels and looked east. Jersey was a mass of fires and smoke, most if it coming from the area around the harbour. Still tempting to suggest they went back to the hacienda for a few more supplies, but the entire new housing development appeared to have been flattened during the night.

“I guessed it would be this bad.” Said Steve. “We’ll head north along the coast, there must be a boat somewhere.”

There were no dissenting voices, even Alejandro found himself nodding in agreement. Jada was going to be a problem; they’d need to carry her over rough ground and up and down stairs. Jersey had been good for her though, she could manage decent distances over even ground.

“Don’t fuss.” She’d yelled at him. “If I need help, I’ll ask for it.”

Gone was the lethargy following the death of Luis. Survival was the main thing and survival was a wonderful motivator.

“Look after Billy.” Daisy said to Maria. “If he can’t keep up.....You make sure I know.”

“I will.”

Of course, they hadn’t gone more than a mile before Daisy had Billy up on her shoulders, while Alejandro had Maria up on his. There was a decent road along the west side of the island, one the aliens hadn’t decided to bomb. It went nowhere really, apart from the Les Mielles Nature Reserve. That was a problem, because there didn’t seem to be any boats on such a bare coastline.

“There’ll be a boat in L’Ouzière.” Said Tracy. “I’ve seen a few boats there.”

It was a long walk and Jada needed quite a few stops to rest. By the time they reached the slipway at L'Ouzière, everyone was hungry, thirsty and tired. Just one large building close to the slipway and that was boarded up.

"I heard it was a restaurant until the Kingdom shut it down." Said Daisy.

"There might be something inside, water at the very least." Said Steve.

"But it's boarded up." Said Jada. "Bound to be locked too.....Bound to be."

"Locks don't stop a hungry man." Said Steve.

Steve Penboss had never struck Alejandro as being either that strong, or athletic. He impressed him though, by the way he used his bare hands and a kitchen knife to get into the closed down restaurant. Once inside they found what looked to be a storehouse for the Kingdom.

"Well.....We won't be short of supplies on our voyage." Said Tracy.

"If we find a boat." Added Jada.

For Alejandro at least, Jada's comment meant she was getting back to being her old self. Caustic remarks and sarcasm were her usual way of communicating with the world.

"There's bottled water, there's been none in the official store for weeks." Said Tracy.

"We might have found King Gideon's secret stash." Said Steve.

Everything was out of date of course, though the accepted rule was that tins were immortal and bottled water was good for at least five years. When Jada pulled off the lid on a tin of peaches, everyone joined in.

"Just a rest and a meal everyone, we still need to find a boat." Said Steve.

"Tinned vegetable salad.....I have seen that since, forever." Said Jada.

Maria found a toilet that by some miracle still flushed. They were a very different group of people than the hungry, tired people who'd arrived, when they began walking along the slipway.

"Just one boat." Said Maria.

"Yes, be careful honey." Said Tracy. "There's a man guarding it."

The man was dressed in the kind of uniform the Kingdom gave out. Repurposed from something else, no two were ever completely alike. The guard's uniform was a light grey, like those worn by community police officers before the war. The Kingdom's soldiers in St Helier tended to hide their weapons, but the guard was different. He held a serious looking assault rifle in his hands, as though he was immensely proud of it.

"Stay clear, this boat is the property of the Kingdom." Said the guard.

"Oh, come on, you must know there's nothing left of St Helier." Said Steve. "Let us take the boat and come with us."

"We're going to France.....Or maybe England." Said Maria.

Alejandro noticed that the guard stopped glaring at Steve and twitched a little, as his head spun towards Maria. There was blood on the concrete slipway, he could see it now they were close to the boat. Maybe someone else had come for the boat, only to be dealt with by the twitchy guard. Or, and he thought it more likely. There had been two guards and they'd fallen out over using the boat to escape.

"This is the King's boat." Yelled the guard. "Keep back.....Keep back or I'll shoot."

"Don't be stupid everyone in the government is dead." Snapped Jada.

"Or dying." Added Tracy.

The guard twitched at every remark and the gun he held was raised a little. A man trained to obey orders, who probably hadn't slept at all the night before. Alejandro had a plan, a risky plan that

made him glad his daughter was no longer up on his shoulders. A plan that relied on the guard being tired and Steve being as fast as he hoped he might be.

“Where is the other guard ?” Shouted Alejandro.

He’d been right, the other guard was probably dead, his body dumped in the ocean. The guard’s head twitched and looked in his direction, a look of hate in the eyes. Up came the gun, but Steve was quicker. For all Alejandro knew, Steve might have been waiting for an opportunity, he was definitely ready to use the knife. The blade went into the man’s neck three times, as Steve kept stabbing. The kids should have reacted as the guard died; Maria did gasp. No one covered their eyes though, there were no looks of horror on faces.

“Good Steve, well done.....I wish you’d been with us when that thug attacked poor Luis.” Said Jada.

“So do I Jada, so do I.”

Steve pulled the guard to the edge of the slipway and shoved him into the water, after relieving him of his rifle. Like it or not, Steve was their leader. No one did anything until he was finished dealing with the body.

“Alright.....Everyone grab your favourite food from the store, we’ve got our boat.” Said Steve.

Alejandro had no wish for power of any kind, he was happy for Steve to give the orders. But he felt a need to be heard, his ideas at least acknowledged.

“We still haven’t decided where we’re going.” He said. “We need to decide; France or England ?”

“We could toss a coin for it.” Said Daisy. “Tails for England, heads for France.”

“Don’t use her coin, she’s put some kind of voodoo on it.” Said Steve. “She always wins.”

“I have a coin.” Said Maria.

She was holding the five-dollar coin he’d given her after finding it while clearing out the storeroom of the car dealership in Torbay. Years old, the coin must have fallen out of a customer’s pocket, before the American dollar had become a digital currency.

“Yes, let’s use my daughter’s coin.” He said.

“Fine by me, tails for England, as Daisy said and heads for France.” Said Steve.

If anyone had expected Maria to toss the coin, catch it and expertly slam it down on the back of her forearm, they’d have been disappointed. His daughter tossed the coin high and did a little leap in the air as it hit the ground. Probably the best way to do it, no one could say the result had been fixed.

Maria ran to her coin and announced the result.

“It’s tails.”

“So, England it is then.” Said Daisy.

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Working with Ish had been rare lately, they tended to have their own projects. Pandora Gray took a sip of campus coffee lookalike and cringed. It tasted dreadful and smelled even worse and there was no caffeine kick.

“We should get half the lab working on a coffee substitute.” She said. “No one would mind, I guarantee it.”

“You do get used to it after a while.” Said Ish.

Deb Newman was with them in their personal unofficial rest area, as was Áslaug Kárasón. An unofficial lab policy meeting in a makeshift rest area. There were several parts of the Delta Lab where staff sat on crates and drank foul tasting beverages. At least no one had the nerve to try and muscle in on their unofficial private sanctum.

“We have several ongoing areas of interest.” Said Dora. “Firstly, we can’t rely on leaving containers of pills dotted about all over England. It’s inefficient and uses up far too many precious resources.”

"The scavengers are moaning about being used as delivery boys." Said Ish.

"Exactly, we need to look for a genetic solution, a way of making mankind immune to the effects of the Green Death. It's our number one priority and we'll be using Sebastians on every trial."

"Won't the erm.....End users of our gene therapy object to having their DNA tinkered with?" Asked Deb.

"I do understand your concerns." Said Dora. "But any idea of talking it over with those it's intended for, is impossible. I'm working on the assumption, that as long as people feel well and their kids don't die....They won't really care how we did it."

"That's quite an assumption." Said Áslaug.

Ish had suggested giving everyone in the lab a 'leave ethics and morals outside the Delta Lab,' speech. Tempting, but there were a few like Áslaug. Push them too hard and there might be consequences, maybe even a refusal to work.

"I agree Áslaug." Said Ish. "Far better than leaving the remnants of mankind to die though."

Áslaug just nodded, it was probably the only vague acceptance they were ever going to get out of her.

"Shouldn't the top priority be finding a way to cure Ish's infected hip?" Asked Deb.

It was an old chestnut; Dora was sure Deb had brought it up before. Several of the lab staff had definitely muttered about it a few times. She looked at Ish and shrugged in a meaningful kind of way. It was his idea to leave the infection off their list of priorities, so he could defend it.

"I'm already embarrassed by how many of the medical team are tied up, looking for a way to cure my infected hip." He said. "I have no wish to use our resources on it too."

"Moving on....." Said Dora. "Second in our priorities and it will again require use of a Sebastian for every trial. We're going to look at a way to alter the human genome quickly and efficiently, to be better suited to a range of hostile planetary environments. Serious work, though the early stages may feel a bit like playing with what-ifs."

"Nothing wrong with play." Said Ish. "It's by playing about with possibilities, that all the great discoveries were made."

"Could I work mainly on that project?" Asked Áslaug.

"I will try, but I can't promise." Said Dora. "Experienced medical staff are still fairly thin on the ground."

"Yes, I didn't get to bed until two this morning." Said Deb. "One of the scavengers came back with shrapnel lodged close to her spine."

"Yep, we're all going to have at least two or three jobs, but our research must take priority." Said Ish.

Dora took a sip from her coffee, knowing the weird aftertaste would stay with her for several hours.

Ish was wrong, she'd never get used to the foul muck, but like so much else, it was all they had.

"Lastly, and this comes with a reminder that there is to be no talk about any of our research to anyone who doesn't work in the Delta Lab." Said Dora.

They all nodded at her, including Ish. She trusted their team, but the junior people who had been brought in to make up the numbers? Dora gave it no more than three months, until they became known as the Frankenstein Lab, or worse.

"Final item for today, though our priorities will always be fluid, we're going to investigate using genetic mutation as a weapon." She said.

Áslaug began to shift about, as though her favourite crate to sit on, was suddenly uncomfortable.

She had to know about that side of their research, though Dora knew there'd eventually be a serious argument about it.

“Two basic prongs to look at.” Said Dora. “Firstly, the production of creatures who can attack and beat the alien Bio-Bots. We’ve all heard about the creatures in the far east who are likely to be some sort of human hybrid. We will not be using human DNA at all from now on.”

“You were.” Said Áslaug.

“We were, but not anymore.” Said Ish. “Think of the toughest predators on the planet with a little alien DNA in the mix. That will be the direction of our research.”

“I know all of you have access to Horace and it goes without saying that she might not like the idea of our weaponizing alien DNA. So be very careful what you say in front of her and remember that she’s probably more intelligent than we are.....Last, but not least.”

“You’re going to create our own version of the Green Death.” Said Deb.

“Yes Deb, we are.” Said Ish. “Does that give you a problem ?”

“No, not at all.....Kill all the fucking things.”

“A nice idea, though we’ll settle for making them keep inside their bunkers until we’re all on our way to a new home.” Said Dora.

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Electronics School 1707 was a fairly nice place for St Petersburg, definitely far nicer than Lianne had expected. Lots of pictures of happy smiling students on the noticeboard. They’d been there over a day and the notices in the refectory still stirred up her curiosity and made her smile. A girl with her hair dyed blue, pictured with half a dozen kittens she was trying to find homes for. A boy with a tiny beard that definitely wasn’t doing him any favours. He was trying to drum up volunteers to help with cleaning out a neglected lake. The notices went on and on, all of them a window on the past. All of them, or just about all of them, had been stuck on the wall before the alien’s had arrived. The most recent one was asking medical students to volunteer for civil defence duty.

“Makes you wonder how many survived.”

A woman soldier was standing next to her. A pretty girl everyone called Bobby, though Barwood probably insisted on using her surname.

“It does, it really does.” Said Lianne. “All of them had family and friends back home...Somewhere. Pictures like this make it all so.....”

“Personal.” Said Bobby. “We could do something, hold a service for them.”

“I’m not that religious really. Looking at their pictures is enough for me. They were all so happy then.”

Bobby took a picture of herself out of her wallet and used a tack to fix it to the board. She was arm in arm with a man in uniform. Lianne had a picture of herself with her dad, which she put on the wall. It grew largely without explanation, driven by curiosity. Gradually more and more of the soldiers added pictures of them and their loved one to the collection. Even Barwood added a picture of him hugging a pretty lady with dark brown hair. When Bobby lowered her head and began to pray, most of the soldiers left. Lianne wandered off too, she really wasn’t that religious.

Lianne had been through a lot in her relatively young life and it had left her with an observation on life. She believed there were an almost infinite number of intelligent beings out there in the universe. They were no doubt praying to an almost infinite number of deities.

“Somewhere they will have got it right.” She muttered.

She’d never discussed it with anyone, though she had hinted at her theory to her dad. With all those infinite number of creatures praying to an infinite number of Gods, someone must have got it right. Somewhere an intelligent being on a faraway planet was praying and receiving a reply from whoever was out there listening, watching....God for want of a better word. Mankind hadn’t got it right,



hardly surprising with an infinite number of possibilities. Someone had though, someone must have dialled the right number, and maybe, just maybe....That was all that mattered.

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Brest brought home to Ela how much damage had been inflicted on the entire world. She'd seen wrecked homes from Indonesia, through Asia and all the way along the coast of Europe. Brest had a military base, she could understand an enemy wanting to destroy it, to render it useless, no longer a threat. But the homes of ordinary people looked the same the world over, very little different in France, compared to Indonesia. Only the language on the shop signs varied and the climate of course.

"It still feels so bad, seeing a child's toy in the wreckage.....I get a pain, here."

Said Ela, pointing to a part of her tummy that felt as though someone was stabbing her.

"Old as I am, I get that too." Said Doug. "It shows you're human."

"Do you think they feel like that too, the aliens I mean?"

"Not the machines, they're just machines." Said Bren. "The aliens though, the living creatures we rarely see.....I think they might have emotions."

"We killed one in Australia, at the tower in Maningrida." Said Matt. "Hideous thing, it looked like a huge maggot. There was something about when it died though, I kind of new it wasn't like killing one of their Bio-Bots. I think they've probably got emotions."

Ela had been told so many times not to drift off mentally and physically. It was hard to stop herself though. When her mind went for a wander, her body tended to go with it. While the others were looking for supplies, she carefully and very slowly headed north, towards an area of grass and trees she could see not that far away. She just had to get away from ruins and destruction.

A tiny park next to what looked to have once been a school. The park showed no sign of the war, despite the school being nothing but destroyed walls and burnt woodwork. The park though was still a green oasis in all the madness, even the children's slide was intact. Ela sat on a bench and enjoyed what felt like a place of refuge.

"Oh.....Pftz.....There, over there you fool...Pftz."

The language was English, but the voice speaking it was strange to her ears. Ela knew she was already too far from the others, yet her perpetual curiosity made her look for the source of the words. Her hearing was good, as was her common sense on a good day. She carried on ignoring the inner voice though, the one telling her to hide, or run.

"Pftz.....That's the wrong way.....Why do I always end up with you?"

"Because I'm the only one who'll put up with you."

Through an arch made of reinforced concrete, pushed into place by the destruction. Past a line of tall bushes and sadly, they saw her the instant she saw them. Two creatures who looked like Vicky's children, though they slightly smaller, with lighter skin. Her initial reaction wasn't fear and they showed no sign of wanting to attack her. She looked at them, as they looked at her. Only the alien creature that looked like a man, interrupted things.

It had looked like a pile of rags in the road, her mind had ignored it until it began to run at her. One of the children of Vicky ran towards her too. In her mind she'd already categorised the strange hybrids as definitely something to do with Vicky.

"Watch its hands Pftz.....Get behind it."

Was Pftz a name or a speech impediment, it was hard to be sure. The creature that was probably called Pftz caught the alien humanoid before it got to her, tearing into its back with sharp claws and wicked looking teeth. They formed a ball of tumbling arms and legs, as each tried to kill the other.

“Oh Pftz.....Keep away from its hands.”

Ela could have stepped to one side, or run away, or just moved back a little. She was frozen to the spot though and the fighting creatures collided with her, sending her head crashing against the asphalt roadway.

She woke up among a pile of crates, with a large dressing taped to her forehead. When Ela stood up the world wobbled about a little, but she didn't fall over. They'd brought her right to the docks; she could see The Eleanor moored at the jetty. It occurred to her that she might have been unconscious for a while, the others might be out searching for her. Almost certainly they'd be unhappy about her wandering off, it had been mentioned before, quite a few times. The two items left by her feet, stopped her worrying about an angry group of adults, who all tried to order her about. There was a weapon, which she picked up first.

“Thank you Pftz.....Thank you.” She muttered.

Ela recognised a disruptor, though the ones she'd seen had been much larger. As it was, she needed to move her belt buckle back a hole, to fit the blaster down the back of jeans. Next the sack had all her attention, as she found it contained lots of really nice tinned food. It had often surprised her that so much of the tinned food they found was nothing anyone particularly wanted to eat. Tinned tapioca pudding was a particular hate, the damned stuff looked and tasted like frogspawn. Why would anyone go to the trouble on putting the dreadful crap in a tin ? The sack though, was so full of nice food in tins, that she had trouble picking it up, even with both hands.

“They might be angry at me, but this will cheer them up.”

Matt and Bren were angry and yelled at her, to show how angry they were. Doug was still looking for her and if anything happened to him, it was her fault. In many ways it felt like having parents again, which felt kind of nice. Her real mum and dad had often yelled at her. Usually because of her curious nature, or boys. Boys had definitely been her downfall once she'd begun to notice them.

“They gave me all this.”

At least the bag of tinned food stopped them yelling at her. Doug returned with a few tins while they were going through her gifts from Vicky's children. Even he seemed too interested in tinned spam to tell her off for vanishing.

“You say that they're the children of Vicky ?” Asked Bren.

“One had a weird name, but they speak English.” Said Ela. “Different to Vicky, but also very like her. Less mouse I'd say and more something else. Their tails looked more like a lizard's than a rodent's. They also gave me this.”

She took the disruptor out of her belt and carefully waved it about a little.

“Wow, let me look at that.” Said Matt.

He took it off her and he and Bren muttered about it, while Doug was still mesmerised by the sack of tinned food. It seemed he loved tinned sardines and they were only about three years out of date. At least he had the good manners to ask, unlike Matt who'd grabbed her disruptor.

“Sure Doug, I hope they taste good.” She said.

From their muttering it seemed Bren knew about disruptors that recharged from just about any electrical energy in the vicinity. Matt suggested leaving it next to The Eleanor's generator to see if the amber charge light changed to green.

“A really useful weapon.” Said Matt to Bren. “Light too.....You should carry it.”

That was enough for Ela, the time had come to let them both know what she thought.

“It's mine, it was given to me.” She snapped.

“She has a point.” Said Doug, through a mouthful of sardines.

"It's dangerous." Said Bren. "Aim it wrong and it could fry the boat's systems and we'll all be walking home to England."

"Then I'll be careful.....It was given to me." Yelled Ela.

"Of course, it might not even work." Said Matt.

He walked right off the boat and onto the jetty, before aiming the disruptor at the derelict ferry. Hard to damage a boat that is already dead, though the disruptors created a lot of sparks on metal surfaces. Just as Ela thought that was it, a disappointing test was over; there was a small explosion and flames began to rise up from below decks on the ferry. Matt smiled as he handed her the disruptor.

"It seems to work pretty well." He said. "Just be careful where you point it."

"I will."

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