

Ishmael II : Pandora

Chapter 5 – Thought and Language

“A word devoid of thought is a dead thing, and a thought unembodied in words remains a shadow.”

— Lev S. Vygotsky



It had been the way the dice had fallen, on the day JV had grounded the entire Fifth West fleet of aircraft. There was no malice behind it, no secret masterplan. The science staff in Norway were now outnumbered by security personnel. It was worse for Kitty MacLaren and Gene Lindine than the others, some of the security guards still didn't trust anyone who'd arrived from Base Albion. There had nearly been all out war when they'd arrived and security guards knew how to hold a grudge. "Oh come on Gene." Said Kitty. "If I'm stuck in this place one day longer.....And we really do need a few extra supplies."

She nearly had him, there was that look of mischief on his face. Gene didn't take much persuasion to break the rules, even when he wasn't bored out of his mind.

"How do we get a helicopter, they're all in a guarded hangar?" He asked.

"We don't use a helicopter, we borrow Andy's Volta Seven flying car."

"Andy's toy.... That thing is a bit of a museum piece."

"I bet if I say you can drive it, you'll agree to come with me in a heartbeat." Said Kitty.

"Can I drive it?"

"I drive there and you drive back.....Interested?"

Kitty MacLaren loved flying the Volta Seven, the closest thing to a flying car ever built in production line numbers. It wasn't really a flying car of course, just a hover platform with a low power jet engine attached to the back. Add on the side thrusters and drive shaft to the back wheels and the Volta Seven used fuel and air at a truly prodigious rate.

'.....a truly ludicrous rate for a planet trying to go green'

According to the best read car magazine in several time zones. The wealthy bought the car to impress, it had even featured in several action movies. The public wanted a flying car, but not one that threatened to empty their bank account every times it was refuelled. Even the moderately wealthy began to take their names off the waiting list for a new Volta Seven.

"Of course I'm interested MacLaren.....I take it you know how to drive it?"

"Hey, I can drive anything, everyone knows that. I flew a captured Ukrainian gunship out of Poland during the troubles over there. No instructions, no time to learn. Get it wrong and you're a greasy stain on the airfield tarmac."

"I heard those gunships are a bastard to fly."

"Oh they are, but I can fly anything....I'm sure I mentioned that."

"Alright, I'm in.....We'll need weapons and a few supplies, just in case."

"Already in the hangar where Andy keeps the Volta."

"You assumed I'd agree?"

"Of course I did Gene, you need a trip out and a bit of an adventure, just as much as I do."

No one bothered them as they used the executive elevator to get to the top level of the facility; they were both respected members of Andy's science team. Security people were like that she'd

observed. They might hate you, but if you had the right clearance, they'd let you into anywhere. Out of the elevator and they were soon at the rear of Andy's private office, in front of the electronic keypad that allowed access to the hangar.

"How did you get the passcode?" Gene asked her.

"I watched Andy open the door so many times. The number got stuck in my mind."

"Hm... past this point and JV would probably consider it treason."

"Then we'd better not tell him about it."

The hangar was intended to be home for a private helicopter for the head of the facility, or maybe a personal vertical take-off aircraft. It looked as though Andy also used it as a dump for unwanted junk. There was even a pile of old archive boxes full of paperwork.

"Well.... This is all a bit squalid." Said Gene.

"Andy kept the Volta well looked after and maintained. He had this thing about if a sudden emergency meant going to somewhere a huge distance away. He always wanted the good old Volta Seven to be ready to take him there."

"Are the hydrogen tanks full?" Asked Gene.

"Oh yes, I checked them yesterday."

The dusty canvas cover had obviously been taken off and put back a few times fairly recently. There were footprints on the grubby floor and little piles of dust around the edge of the cover. Despite being advertised as a four seater, the rear seat of the Volts was quite small, as was the luggage area. The vehicle revealed as Kitty pulled back the cover, was big though, with most of the space being taken up by the engine and fuel tanks. The lines reminded Kitty of an old E type jaguar she'd once seen in a museum.

"I did once see Andy fly it, but close up.....It's beautiful." Said Gene.

"The upgraded hydrogen engine can make it tough to drive, but not if we're careful....No flooring the pedal when it's your turn to drive Gene."

"And no one will know we've taken it?"

"No, it hasn't even got a transponder....No GPS now of course, but it has got an inertial guidance system with the last half dozen places it's been to loaded up. The town of Alta isn't far and we never did clear the best stuff out of the supermarkets."

"Alta it is then." Said Gene.

"Press the big green button to open the outside doors." She said.

The car had been designed to be driven by the public with a minimal number of lessons. That didn't mean Kitty didn't take the pre-flight checks seriously. The Volta was a bit of a museum piece and their lives depended on it getting them to Alta and more importantly, getting them home again.

"In the end it was The Americans who killed the car." Andy had once told her. "Their aviation authority demanded a full pilot's license to fly it. The company went bust four months later."

Which made perfect sense to her. The idea of letting anyone with a driving license fly a ton and a half of car over people's houses sounded insane. The hangar doors rattled open and the car seemed to be ready to fly. She started the powerful motor as Gene made himself comfortable in the passenger seat.

"I'm assuming this thing has a heater?" He asked.

"Thing.... You'll offend her. Yes, this isn't an electric car and it was designed to appeal to the wealthy, who like their comforts. It might be minus twenty with the wind chill out there, but we'll be comfortable."

The Volta drove like an ordinary car on a flat surface, with the ability to take off vertically, if you could afford to see the fuel tank emptying as you watched the gauge. It was also a clever car with a pretty good onboard AI for its age. Drive it straight out of the hangar door and over the two hundred foot drop to the bottom of the valley below and it would automatically turn on the lift thrusters. Even better, it would stop the car falling and automatically keep it travelling straight and true. It required a certain amount of trust in ageing components of course, but to Kitty, that was all part of the fun.

“Get your seat belt nice and tight.” She said.

“Oh shit MacLaren, I hadn’t thought about this part.”

“Too late to change your mind now.”

No running at it and hitting the vertical thrust lever at what might be the right moment. She’d already been allowed to drive the car out of the hangar once and she been sat next to Andy a few times, when he trusted the Volta to get it right. She simply drove out of the hangar and over the drop.

“Wow, that was impressive.” Said Gene. “I forgot to ask if this.....Does she have ejector seats ?”

“She doesn’t.....No parachutes either.”

Andy had upgraded the hydrogen motor to be both more fuel efficient and more powerful. Kitty was careful not to push the vehicles too hard until she was used to how it felt. It was unlike anything else she had ever flown and there was that thrill of flying what looked and felt like a car.

“Oh Maclaren, this is a wonderful beast. I want one now, how much did Andy pay for her ?”

“If you have to ask, you couldn’t afford one.”

By the time Kitty was happy to fly the car fast at just above treetop height, they were almost there. The coastal town of Alta wasn’t that far from the Fifth West base. The guidance system began to ping, its way of saying they were almost there, just as Kitty saw the roofs through the trees.

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If nothing else, the grounding of aircraft had meant less time away from Biff. Ishmael was keeping a mental tally and it was now the forty second night in a row where he’d shared a bed with Biff. When they’d been travelling around there had always been others sharing their mobile home, or their caravan, sometimes they’d even had to share a tent with two other members of the science team. Now they had a small but comfortable apartment in the campus. Most importantly, they had privacy, lots and lots of wonderful privacy.

“Don’t forget we’re invited for dinner with Andy tonight.” Said Biff.

“Oh, I hate those things. Can we make an excuse ?”

“Not for this one, it’s important.”

“Fine.”

Yes privacy was wonderful. It meant a friendly tussle while Biff tried to finish dressing, followed by a lot of kissing.

“Andy has invited Deb and Iris and you like them Ish. Iris reminds me of my Aunt Edna, who always sent me socks for Christmas. Hideous home knitted socks.”

“Wasn’t she more than a little crazy ?” He asked.

“Yes, but great fun.....Just like Iris. I can’t wait to hear what gem she comes out with tonight.”

Touching was another wonderful part of privacy. Kissing nearly always led to touching, intimate touching. Biff found his dick as it began to form a bulge in his boxer shorts. She gently rubbed until it became hard and throbbing. She sighed in his ear as she pulled away from him.

“Oh, sorry Ish.....I forgot.....I have to be in the lab by nine.”

He flopped back on the bed and watched the front of his boxer shorts crumple, as his mind realised there was no longer any need for an erection.

"Me too actually." He said. "I promised Inka's kids they can feed Horace this morning."

"She needs a better name than Horace." Said Biff.

"Rename her if you want, but that will mean changing a lot of paperwork."

"Ewww yeah, you've got a point Ish. Leave her as Horace."

Biff left for the lab, while he was still looking for the notes he'd brought home the previous evening. Horace was creating alpha waves in the organ that was probably her brain. It was huge and exciting and he'd wanted Biff's opinion on the implications.

"Damn notes, I'm sure you hide when I go to bed." He muttered.

They were hiding inside the bright yellow binder he must have walked past at least four or maybe five times. He was still on his way to the pens far earlier than usual, though Kata and Antun had still beaten him there.

"Do you guys usually arrive at this time?" He asked.

"Mum makes breakfast at seven." Said Kata. "She's got a job working in the kitchen gardens."

Job had a new meaning on the campus, to the one generally accepted before the invasion. Job didn't mean paid employment, though it didn't mean slave labour either. Everyone on the campus was fed and clothed by Fifth West. In return they were expected to contribute to the campus in some way, if they could. Only Iris seemed exempt from any obligation to work for her supper, but she had just turned eighty eight. Even Inka's kids had allotted hours when they were expected to clean out the animal pens.

"I'll try to get here earlier next time." Said Ish. "I don't want you to have to wait outside the door for hours."

"We don't mind." Said Antun.

They seemed to wake up as he let them inside the pen where Horace was kept. Hers wasn't like the other pens, in lieu of her being an intelligent creature, possibly with an IQ equal or higher than that of the average man on the street. It was clean and comfortable, though there was still a layer of straw on the floor. Horace might well have the IQ of a budding Einstein, but she still crapped on the floor.

"She's growing, I'm sure of it." Said Kata.

"You might be right, she certainly eats a lot." Said Ish.

The kids had their own stools now, so they could talk to Horace and pet her, as he ran just about every test he could think of. Mostly non-invasive, though the kids glared at him if a needle seemed to hurt the creature. He found it hard to think of the harmless looking beast as one of them, one of the aliens who had invaded the planet, his planet.

"I discovered she's begun to generate alpha waves." Said Ish. "That's good, it means she's probably looking to see if we have others of her kind here. It also means I might be able to communicate with her, the same way I did with the last Horace."

"You mean they can read each other's minds?" Asked Kata.

"Yes, I'm certain about that and they can read our minds too. Not that reading minds means we can communicate that well. Images can be shared and feelings, but to properly communicated requires a common language."

"I don't get that....If you can read someone's mind...." Said Kata.

"Alright Kata, how do you think about solving a problem?" He asked.

"I'm not sure, I think it through I suppose...I talk it through silently to myself."

“Good yes, you talk it through in your head. But supposing you don’t have a language ? We had a cat when I was small, a really clever one. By the time she was one year old, that cat could open every cupboard in the house. How do you think she worked out how to do that ?”

As he watched Kata thinking it over, an idea formed. He knew how to make better use of Inka’s kids than assigning them to mucking out duty in the pens.

“I know, cats must think in pictures.” Said Kata. “It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“There are a few current theories, but yes, you’re right. It’s likely that our intelligent pets think in a series of very detailed and intense images. Still very limited though, without a language to make proper use of those images. A very clever man once said; ‘a word devoid of thought is a dead thing, and a thought unembodied in words remains a shadow.’”

“That makes so much sense Ish.” Said Kata.

“How would both of you like to look after Horace as your proper job ?” He asked.

“Can we do that ? Miss Olvera said we had to do the job she gave us.”

“Leave me to handle Louise, I am allowed to choose my own staff. Would you like to be officially part of the science team ?”

“Both of us ?” Asked Antun.

“Yes both of you, no more shovelling muck out of the pig pens.”

“Oh, yes please.” Said Kata.

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“You can’t go in there Deb, it’s broken in two.” Said Iris.

“The storeroom was in the stern section.” Said Deb. “That’s still upright....I can even see the stairs are still there.”

The borrowed Fifth West four wheel drive came with all the usual gadgets. The state of the art military binoculars even had a zoom function. One half of the Russian cruise ship was now on its side and open to the ocean tides. The stern half though, that still looked fairly intact.

“It’s only vodka Deb. You can’t risk your life for a crate of vodka.”

“Calling genuine Potemkin just vodka is sacrilege. I knew there’d be a demand, but everyone wants some and they’re willing to give a blank cheque in terms of future favours.”

“It looks so dangerous though.” Said Iris.

“Risky.....I’ll give you that, it will be risky. Look Iris.....The sack barrow I used is still where I left it.

That has to be a sign. There were two crates of Potemkin and I’m going to get the other one.”

“You’re becoming a spiv and no good will come of it.”

“This from the woman who wears a fur coat in the campus canteen.”

“One has to keep up appearances dear.”

There had been a bad storm, which had probably broken the back of the Dimitri Zhukov. The stern section was still more or less upright, though the lean looked steeper than the last time they’d been inside the wrecked cruise ship.

“I’m going in there Iris, you can stay here. This thing is armoured and has bullet proof glass in the windows. Nothing will be able to get to you.”

“No, we’ve had this row before dear. You go and I go with you.”

Deb just looked at the old lady and wondered how much of a fuss she might make if she tied her up and left her in the back of the vehicle, trussed up like a turkey.

“Leave me here and I’ll call in an emergency.” Said Iris. “Everyone and their dog will come running and Francine will go crazy.”

"Alright, but we get the vodka and leave. No more opening steamer trunks....Agreed?"

"I have my fur coat and I'm happy....Agreed."

Deb had a gun in a holster that fired traditional bullets. Great against human crazies and looters, but not much use against any alien Bio-Bots that might turn up. She handed a rifle sized disruptor to Iris.

"It's heavy, but you can use the sling to carry it over your shoulder. I don't expect you to use it, just hand it to me if we find anything nasty in there. I can't drag boxes of vodka about and carry a disruptor."

"It's very heavy."

"You'll be fine."

Even the weather seemed to be trying to deter them. A cold wind was coming straight off the ocean. A lazy wind that wanted to go through them rather than around. Deb was shivering by the time they'd reached the discarded sack barrow.

"Are you still having a thing with Art Singer?" Asked Iris.

"Where did that come from.....Yes, not that it's anything to do with you."

"I thought he was gay."

Deb was sure it wasn't dementia, the old lady picked up on things far too quickly to be suffering from that. Iris seemed to enjoy the immunity age gave her from the consequences of saying outrageous things, simple as that.

"Jeeezz Iris.....Not everyone feels locked into a sexual preference for life these days. Things have changed a bit since you were born."

"Just be careful...I hope you're taking precautions."

"Fuck Iris, stop it, just stop it! I don't feel comfortable with the way this conversation is going. Make yourself useful and watch for alien creatures."

"I was just..."

"Shut up."

Deb dragged the sack barrow over the pebbles deliberately, so that the screeching noise stopped any further chance of conversation. The stairs they needed to use were now fully exposed to the weather.

"It's all a bit wet and slippery." Said Deb. "You can keep guard here, while I go and get the vodka."

"Not happening.....I'll hold onto the handrail and be very careful."

Neither of them slipped, though the metal treads on the stairs felt like walking on ice. The storeroom where Iris had found her beloved fur coat was pretty much as they'd left it, complete with the body of the woman who'd attacked them.

"Oh, I'd forgotten about her." Said Iris.

"Be thankful the weather has been cold, or she'd be stinking the place out."

The second box of vodka was still there and it looked undamaged. Deb had the box strapped and taped to the sack barrow, when Iris seemed to want to start being annoying again.

"Look Deb, I know you told me to shut up....."

"Just don't talk to me like I'm a fifteen year old."

"I was young once, I can remember having certain....Needs. I even had a crush on a female teacher when I was at school, though nothing came of it. I might be old, but I do understand. I wasn't born during the reign of Queen Victoria you know."

"Fine, I'm sorry for shouting at you. Can we please have the rest of this conversation in the nice cosy vehicle?"

"I would never tell anyone....You can talk to me Deb."

Of course she hugged Iris, the situation required it. Deb did it to show the old lady she was forgiven, but she felt her own shoulder muscles relax as they hugged.

"Alright..... You're watching my back as I get the barrow down the stairs." Said Deb.

A few nights of ocean water running over the stairs had made them lethal. Probably a kind of salt water algae, the white gooey stuff on the stairs felt more dangerous going down the stairs. Deb was keeping her left arm on the handrail, while she held onto the sack barrow with her right. There was no spare hand to hold a weapon, or any caution to spare. Just keeping upright was bad enough. She didn't even see the alien creature until it had come right through the hole in the bulkhead.

"Deb.....Watch out.....It's right in front of you." Yelled Iris.

It was one of the small green Bio-Bots that looked like a large lizard. It was trying to match its skin colour to a rusty bulkhead in broad daylight, and failing. It shimmered in an odd way, which now that she'd noticed it, made it easy to see.

"Keep back Iris." She shouted.

The people in the lab had mentioned that all the alien robots and organic constructs seemed to deteriorate, which was made worse by bad weather. It seemed they were designed to last for the pre-armada period of the invasion. The small green moved slowly, but it was still probably lethal. She'd heard they could disembowel a person in seconds with their sharp front claws.

Deb heard the sound of a disruptor firing.

The shot missed the creature and hit the edge of the rusty hole in the bulkhead the small green had just climbed through. The shot sent up a fine mix of paint and rust, which hit her in the face. She was effectively blind until she could wash the crap out of her eyes.

"Deb."

"Shoot it Iris, shoot it."

Deb heard the sound of a disruptor firing.

There was a small water bottle hanging off her utility belt. Something for every occasion, the campus version of a Swiss army knife dangling off her belt. Only about half a dozen mouthfuls of water, but the bottle would be just right to irrigate her eyes. Her eyes stung when she blinked and all she could see was a mixture of light and dark shading. Deb had to do something risky. She let go of the handrail and hoped the weight of the barrow didn't drag her down the stairs, it didn't.

"I hit it Deb, I killed it."

"Good.....Just be careful on those stairs now."

Deb had the bottle in her hand, which caused another problem. It had a screw top lid and she'd run out of free hands again. It seemed the time had come to let go of the barrow and allow her precious box of Potemkin Vodka to make its own way down. Half the bottles would probably be broken when the case hit the pebbles, but half a crate was better than nothing. At that moment another hand felt hers and took the bottle away.

"Oh Iris, I'm so glad you didn't stay with the four wheel drive. I'll put my head back....Drench my eyes, every drop of water in the bottle."

"Alright, tell me when you're ready."

It hurt so much to fully open her eyes and even a sunlit sky was just a blur.

"Now....Pour all of it into my eyes."

The result was so sudden and so wonderful that it felt almost miraculous. She could see the clouds and see them in detail, even the fluffy little edges. It still stung a bit when she blinked, but she could see again. She turned to see a worried looking Iris.

"I'm fine Iris....I think. A trip to see the medic is called for, but I can see you."

"Oh, you had me so worried."

"Where did the small green end up?" Asked Deb.

"The bottom of the stairs, it's still twitching."

Deb got a good hold of the handrail again, before twisting a little to see the ground below. Her foot did slip a little, but she managed to regain her footing. There it was at the bottom of the stairs, its rear legs twitching. Disruptors were a multi-purpose weapon that interfered with the electronics of robots, or the nerve impulses of living beings. Aim it right and it would stop a human heart, though nine millimetre bullets were probably more reliable. The small green was now a harmless piece of twitching bio-technology.

"Once I've got the Potemkin back to the vehicle, I'll come back for the small green." Said Deb.

"Why do you want that thing?"

"Ishmael wants them, even the dead ones. He told me he uses them for spare parts."

"Ewww."

"That's what I thought....Come on Iris. You're still watching my back as I get this damn barrow down the stairs."

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"If you have a car that can land right in front of the supermarket." Said Gene. "It makes sense to park it right in front of the supermarket."

"Alright I'll give you that one." Said Kitty.

Gene had forgotten how much he missed his favourite brand of toothpaste and a particular make of tinned peaches. The Volta was ridiculously overpowered; it could probably lift a tank up into the air. The problem was space and for Gene that added something to their looting expedition. It was the way his parents had bought for Christmas. There had never been that much money when he was young, so every purchase needed to be thought about and justified. Far from making him feel deprived, it made everything they did have feel a bit, special.

"I know we said no booze MacLaren, but I haven't tasted a good bourbon in months."

"Every shopping trip becomes a booze finding expedition." Said Kitty. "We said we weren't going to fall into that trap.....It takes up so much space."

"It's only two bottles."

She was actually shaking her head as she smiled at him.

"I'm not your mum Gene, pick up what you want. It just means less of everything else we might find."

He grinned back at her.

"It comes in boxes of four bottles....Seems a pity to break up a box." He said.

"There is the foot well in front of the rear seat." Said Kitty. "We can still fit quite a bit in there. I think four bottles of your favourite hooch can be squeezed in."

"Can we do that?" He asked. "Is it safe to really load up the Volta like that?"

"Yes, you should have seen some of the stuff Andy once strapped to the roof."

"So much for treating the old girl gently."

"Volta built vehicles to last."

They had a shopping trolley each, another way of adding a bit of discipline to their shopping trip, which was really a looting expedition. When their trolleys were full that was it, they'd collected about as much as could be squeezed into the flying car.

"Why does all the tinned stuff at the base taste so dreadful?" He asked.

"Purchasing probably put everything out to tender. You get cheap, you tend to get tasteless."

They had cases of tinned hot dogs back at the Fifth West base, but no one ever wanted to eat them. Gene picked up half a dozen tins of his favourite hot dogs to add to his rapidly filling trolley. The supermarket in Alta was a little off the beaten track and showed little signs of being systematically looted.

“Oh Gene, there are still packs of luxury toilet tissue. I so wish we could drive here in a truck and empty the place out.”

“Grab a pack and carry them on your lap, I won’t tell anyone.”

There was water damage where someone or something had broken a window. Apart from that the supermarket was in pretty good condition. They’d even managed to find two trolleys that didn’t have squeaky wheels. What had been the frozen food section had probably once been a stinking health hazard. All that had dried out, or been eaten by vermin. Apart from a slight musty smell in a few places, the store was a pleasure to wander around.

“I hate to say these words....My trolley is now full.” Said Gene.

Overfull really, a few tins were sticking up out of the trolley, which broke the rules a little. Kitty added another pack of the fancy toilet roles to her trolley and they were finished. They saw their first small green of the day, as it clambered up the outside of a nearby building.

“I’ll take care of this one.” Said Gene. “The way it’s moving, it’ll be a mercy killing.”

It fell, the first time he’d ever seen one lose its grip completely. As it hit the ground he fired a disruptor at it.

“To think we once so terrified of those things.” Said Kitty.

It carried on trembling, while oozing what looked like grey coloured blood with hints of green in it.

“Even the dying ones will still kill you, if you give them a chance.” Said Gene. “I’ll pack the car, while you watch for any buddies he might have.”

The atmosphere changed as he crammed their goodies into the Volta, while MacLaren kept turning around, watching for signs of more alien creatures. It was a relief when he sat in the driving seat and drove across the shopping centre car park.

“Now.....Push the thrust lever up.” Said Kitty.

“Wow.....That was easy.”

“Designed to be driven by the man in the street, or the woman.....As long as they had oodles of cash.” Said Kitty.

The keeping them up in the air bit was taken care of by the car’s own AI. All he had to do was mainly steer it like a car, while changing their altitude with a simple up or down on the thrust lever. He’d completed about four circuits of Alta to get a feel for the vehicle, when Kitty began pointing at the ground.

“There’s a woman down there..... She’s waving at us.” She said.

No need to ask if he should land, civilian survivors were now as rare as unicorn droppings. During one trip to Alta they’d rescued over a dozen locals. Over the next six months, as the invasion wiped out power and communications, the number of civilians seen by Fifth West pilots dropped to almost nil. Gene landed the Volta quite close to the woman, but far enough way to avoid the thrusters scorching her. MacLaren went first, while he covered her with a disruptor. The woman yelled at them in what was probably Norwegian.

“Sorry..... Do you speak English ?” Asked Kitty.

“A little.....It’s my friend Kåre. I think he’s dying.....”

For a man who was supposed to be dying, Kåre had a very loud and persistent cough. They’d chosen a room at the back of a car dealership to hide in, there was hardly any daylight. Gene had noticed

people tended to hide in the dark, when somewhere with a few windows would have made much more sense.

"I'm MacLaren and this is Gene, we're from the Fifth West base."

"Everyone in town knows the base, you all used to shop here.....Before....I thought it had closed. I'm Anna and this is Kåre my boyfriend. Do you have medicines?"

"Let me have a look at him." Said Kitty.

Neither of them were really doctors, but they'd both fixed more than their fair share of battle wounds. Kitty knelt next to the young man, while pressing her hand to his neck.

"His pulse is far too rapid. Has he eaten anything you haven't?"

"No... He thinks it was the gas the alien machines are pumping out." Said Anna.

"It is the gas....I know it." Spluttered Kåre.

"Did it make you sick Anna?" Asked Gene.

"No, and none of our friends were sick.....There were six of us, but the rest carried on without us, after Kåre got sick." Said Anna.

Communications were now difficult with the other Fifth West bases, but Gene remembered a burst packet message that included something about an illness associated with the alien's gas. An illness that looked like a bad reaction to an infection. By the way Kitty looked at him, he could tell she was thinking the same thing.

"Where was this alien machine?" Asked Kitty.

"To the north near Komagfjord. We were trying to get away from all the alien creatures, they're everywhere. The weather kept getting worse though and when Kåre started to be sick.....We came back here on our own."

"The science team will want to see them." Kitty said to him.

"Oh Crap, that means you'll want me to leave my bourbon behind."

"They're both quite small Gene. If you ditch the box of booze and I leave the toilet tissue, they'll be able to squeeze in, just."

Gene sighed. Somewhere in his imagination he was sure he could already taste the booze.

"Fine.....I'll call and let them know." He said.

Anna seemed quite excited about travelling in a flying car, though her boyfriend seemed to be coughing less and saying very little. Gene didn't give the young man long, though Anna didn't need to know that.

"Our medical team will look after him." He said.

He then turned on the communicator and made a very quick call, to say they wouldn't be returning to the base alone.

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It had become part of his routine at the end of the afternoon. He had no fear of the new Horace, none at all. He was aware that if she could, she'd probably summon enough alien creatures to kill everyone at the campus and rescue her. That wasn't going to happen though, and the female alien would understand that. To use those kinds of resources to rescue one of their own out of the millions who'd just arrived, perhaps billions....It wasn't going to happen. The new Horace was expendable to her own kind. Ish had wondered if that was why the original Horace had tried to help him, no one likes to be considered expendable.

"Are you hungry? Of course you are, you're always hungry."

Just two cabbage balls, more would keep her awake. Ish leant against Horace and felt her relax and drop slightly, so that her body rested on top of her many tiny feet. A nap with the alien was his usual

end to the working day in the pens. He closed his eyes and almost instantly fell into a deep sleep. The recurring dream began, the one where he could see swarms of strange creatures killing the alien Bio-Bots in vast numbers. Some of his dreams were a precognition of future events and some weren't. The dream of the vast swarm of furry creatures with huge jaws was a real premonition, he knew it. Ish tried to remember everything, so that he could send JV a full report. He'd already described the creatures to Biff.

"I know my enemy's enemy is supposed to be my friend Ish, but these things sound like they're probably no one's friend."

He tended to agree with her. The dreams were always set in a jungle somewhere, rarely a city. He'd seen the creatures pull apart entire alien buildings somewhere with a hot climate. Something that had happened, might happen, or might never happen? Ish had no idea, but it felt real. He woke up and stroked Horace.

"I over napped, time for me to go home Horace.....Kata will be in to feed you later."

It happened as he stood up, the image in his mind. There was one of the strange creatures, pushed into his mind by Horace. It had to be her, using the same method the original Horace had used. There was sound though, that was new. A definite series of sounds associated with the beast that looked part mouse, part velociraptor and part human, all mixed together by an insane committee. "Crap..... Is that your word for it?"

He had a sketch somewhere, a sort of identikit image one of the more artistic students had drawn. He put it in front of the dark orbs that seemed to be the alien's eyes. He pointed at it;

"Monster." He said.

The word for the alien creature from hell was in his head again. No room for pure luck or a daft error though, communicating with Horace was too important.

"Monster." He said, again.

Again the same alien word was in his head. He'd never be able to pronounce it in a million years, but he'd be able to spell it phonetically. Ish had to try it; he pointed at himself.

"Ishmael."

He pointed at Horace and a word was in his head, a complex sound with several syllables.

"Ishmael." He said again, pointing at his chest.

He pointed at Horace and the same word was in his head again. Crap.... He'd just communicated with an alien. Only two words, but it would be a hundred the next day, two hundred the day after that, three hundred.....Fuck, he'd worked out how to talk to Horace, or rather Horace had worked it out. His arms wouldn't go all the way around, but he hugged Horace as best he could.

"Abstract ideas are going to be tough old buddy, but we'll do it."

A terminal on his desk was still turned on. Ish sent a simple message to Biff, hoping she'd look at it fairly quickly.

'Horace and I just communicated. Just two words, but we communicated – Ish.'

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