

Ishmael II : Pandora

Chapter 7 – The Air We Breathe

“If it had just been him he’d have fought the alien machines until the shotgun had used the last shell. It wasn’t just him though.”



Pandora Gray hadn’t slept well the night before. Small nuggets of hard intelligence kept arriving from Fifth West patrols and small pockets of the UK military that were still operating. There wasn’t much of the British Army left, but sometimes a report arrived by data burst.

“Cuffley New Town has gone.” She’d told Ish, over breakfast.

“I assumed my mum had died a while ago Biff.”

“So had I and if my parents were alive.....It’s unlikely they’d still be in Cuffley.”

Judy and Karl, it felt weird to think of her parent’s names and think about them again after so much time.

“If my mum is alive she’ll probably be looting supermarkets to keep old ladies fed... Her leading a militant wing of the Women’s Institute.” He’d said.

“Yeah, good old Wendy.”

They’d laughed for a while, but there was the report on the computer screen. Cuffley was now nothing but ruins and little remained of Hatfield. Not for the first time Dora thought that being only children was a blessing for Ish and her. No siblings to worry about, no more blood relations to be assumed dead. Dora definitely wasn’t feeling her usual self, as the helicopter came in over the trees.

“Good on you MacLaren, I knew you’d get here in one piece.” She muttered.

It mattered, it really did. If Kitty MacLaren could get all the way from Norway and arrive without a scratch, there was still hope. The destruction of the town where she’d lived had brought her to a low point. MacLaren doing the near impossible though, that was like Christmas come early. No time to daydream though.....

“Come on, get the body and samples off the helicopter.” She yelled.

Once they’d unloaded everything, including the two passengers from Norway, the helicopter would be landed nearly two miles away, next to an entrance to the underground hangars. Do it efficiently and the supersonic capable craft would be hidden underground within twenty minutes of arriving. Dora was so absorbed with getting the body out of the helicopter, that she was actually startled when the new member of the medical team introduced herself.

“Good evening, I hope we didn’t arrive too late for dinner ? I’m Áslaug Kárason.”

“I’m Pandora Gray and no, you haven’t missed dinner. I heard we had a new doctor on the way.”

Said Dora. “We definitely need someone who has your experience in pathology.”

“I’m sure my experience will be useful.....It would have been nice to be asked though.”

Rumours were sometimes true and sometimes they were just rumours. It seemed the rumour that Dr Kárason was an unwilling conscript to the Filey Campus was true.

“Sorry, even though it was none of my doing.” Said Dora. “We’ve lost quite a few skilled doctors, including our one properly trained pathologist. Plus JV isn’t big on consulting people on things.”

“Hmmm, I see.”

Kárason was going to be a problem for a while, but she’d either settle in or make her own life a misery. It was a relief to pass her and her luggage onto one of the post grad students. Dora went

looking for Anna, who once again was rumoured to be unhappy about being brought to England. She found the girl being comforted by MacLaren.

"It's quite an informal atmosphere most of the time." Kitty was saying. "Quite a few people here are close to your own age. You'll be fine and the food here is good, better than in Norway."

"They just want me as a guinea pig." Said Anna.

"That's true we do." Said Dora. "A well looked after guinea pig who might be able to help us save the lives of a great many people. Is that too much to ask for a safe home and never being hungry again?"

"I suppose not."

"Go with Paul here, he'll get you settled in."

Dora gave Anna two weeks of being in a mood before she was probably dating one of the post grad students and having a great time. It was Áslaug Kárason who might be a long term problem. Dora was a firm believer in busy people having no time to feel hard done to. She was going to keep the new member of the medical team really busy.

"Are you here for a while, or going back to Norway?" She asked Kitty.

"Not sure really....Though I suppose I'll be in Filey until they decide what to do with me."

"Good, you must go and see Deb Newman, she's got some genuine bottles of Potemkin."

"Wow, really?"

"Really."

"That makes the total terror of the flight here, almost worthwhile."

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"They wouldn't lie.....They saw what they saw." Said Liza Bates.

Tyler Bates knew his wife was right, their children knew the world around them better than he did. Even if Zane was still a child and sometimes a little unreliable, Tirsas wasn't. Nineteen now, she'd have been at college if the invasion hadn't happened.

"I know, I'm not saying anyone is lying." He said. "It's just that we've spent so long here. There's enough food to last for years and there's.....Tonya. That makes this place somewhere we don't just run away from."

His family understood, of course they did. Thirteen year old Tonya had died from something wrong in her stomach, probably cancer. Having a daughter buried outside, right at the back of Liza's rose garden. That made the house theirs and it made the garden sacred ground.

"If you could see the far end of town dad.....It's gone, all of it." Said Tirsas.

"Yes, we've been over all this and I believe you." Said Tyler.

"There must be other nice places we could go." Said Zane.

Tyler doubted that, though he didn't want to use scare tactics, his family looked scared enough already. They'd travelled miles through Kent to find the perfect house in the perfect location. On the way they'd seen so much devastation and met so many desperate people. A situation that was probably far worse now. Liza put her hand on his shoulder.

"Preparing in case we have to run wouldn't hurt." She said.

"Yes dad, we've still got the old backpacks." Said Tirsas. "No harm in putting a few essentials in them, just in case."

Tyler knew his kids needed to feel they were doing something, even though he had no intention of dragging his family cross country again, not unless it was a matter of life or death. No good trying to have a quiet word with his wife, all decisions affected the entire family, so the entire family had to be part of all major decisions. Not his idea, they'd ganged up and ambushed him with that one.

“Just a few clothes in case the worst happens.” He said. “Don’t go crazy and pack everything we own.”

“Food though, we’ll need food.” Said Tirsa.

“Yes of course, but just a few tins.” Said Liza. “As your dad said, don’t start shoving everything into back packs.”

“Tirsa will need a month to pack all her hair products.” Said Zane.

“Oi !”

They were laughing, the hunted look had left his kid’s eyes. There had to be a plan though, something credible everyone could agree on. If it had just been him he’d have fought the alien machines until the shotgun had used the last shell. It wasn’t just him though.

“You need to patrol every day, just as far as the supermarket.” He said. “If that part of town is demolished we’ll start packing everything we want to take.”

He paused for objections or other suggestions, but there were none.

“There’s a lot of woodland between us and town.” He continued. “If they begin cutting that down, we run with what we can carry.”

“Where will we go ?” Asked Zane.

“North to the coast again, the way we travelled before. We’ll keep heading away from London. It worked before and it keeps us on the move. I hope it doesn’t happen of course....Well, do you all agree ?”

Strange, they’d all wanted him to agree to move, but now; their faces were telling a different story. They were all nodding, though only his wife said anything.

“I really hope the aliens find somewhere else to flatten.”

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Before joining Fifth West, Andy Korenberg had been head of the European Federation’s space programme for years. He’d designed their moon base and all the Diaspora class shuttles. He’d been good at talking committees into funding some fairly off the wall projects, which meant he was good with office politics. He understood the need to congratulate people for doing a good job. Small rewards were important too. During bad times a small reward could give a team of people just the right boost.

“Champagne, the real stuff.” He said. “Chilled to perfection I hope, you’ve all earned it.”

The previous person to run the campus before Francine Lazan had been quite keen on good living, too keen quite a few had said. Mostly he’d left a lot of problems to be sorted out, but he had left a cellar full of exceptionally good wines. Andy had talked Francine into letting him have a dozen bottles of decent champagne for the meeting, which doubled as a celebration.

“We’ve still a long way to go.” He said. “The first of the Diaspora Valkyrie Class Shuttles is complete. Yes we did rename them, Diaspora Eight was beginning to sound a little dull. All tests and simulations gave a perfect result.”

There was a hell of a way to go, before they had enough shuttles to take a viable population to a new world, but getting the first one finished and tested was a major milestone. There was a glass of champagne for everyone and a buffet. Andy left a recording running of the announcement to play across the big screen on constant loop, while he circulated.

“I was hoping to meet you.”

A familiar female face and a trace of a Norwegian accent. She was wearing a name badge, though he didn’t need to read it. He’d actually hired Áslaug Kárason when he’d been in charge of the Fifth West Norwegian base.

"Hello, Doctor Kárason I hope you're settling in alright ?"

"I need to talk to you about my status here."

"What seems to be the problem ?" He asked.

"I was effectively kidnapped and brought here. Unless I'm returned to Norway, I'll be contacting the Norwegian Medical Association. I'm sure they'll cause a lot of problems for the Fifth West Corporation."

Andy was seeing a few people with what he'd begun to think of as self gas lighting. A weird kind of denial that society had effectively fallen apart. As with Áslaug Kárason, they accepted there was an alien invasion, but they refused to admit the usual rule of law had gone. Luckily there were very few cases and those who did have it seemed to be functioning normally. So far Francine was only person he'd discussed it with.

"Look Andy, no one is going crazy." She'd told him. "It's not as if we need to stop them handling sharp objects. Most people have a weird idea or two after being in hiding from the aliens for so long. They'll get over it, eventually."

He wasn't a trained psychologist, but he was used to dealing with politicians and most of those had seemed a little strange. He smiled at Áslaug Kárason.

"I will pass on your concerns to JV." He said. "Has anyone told you that all members of the campus team are guaranteed a place on the fleet leaving Earth ?"

"No, I wasn't aware of that."

"It's worth considering Dr Kárason, as you seem to be stuck here anyway."

"I will consider that."

She drifted away from him as people at such events tend to do. Eventually Áslaug Kárason would find someone with a similar grievance and make a new friend for life. Andy saw Ish and Dora together and without the Malovic children in tow, which was rare. He grabbed two glasses of champagne from a passing tray and took them over.

"I was hoping to see you both today." He said. "Here, you've earned your glass of champagne."

"It always makes me sneeze, but I'll have it anyway." Said Dora.

"Take care of the luxuries and the necessities will take care of themselves." Said Ish.

"A bit of Oscar Wilde ?" Asked Andy.

"Dorothy Parker, my mum was a huge fan. You must have heard I'm now up to a five hundred word vocabulary with the new Horace."

"Yes, we've all high hopes that will provide a lot of important information. JV is constantly mentioning it in his data burst updates."

They weren't stupid, they knew he had something specific to discuss with them. Two bright young adults with their faces looking at him, waiting. It was actually a little intimidating.

"So, out with it Andy." Said Dora. "What impossible thing does JV want now ?"

"None of what I'm about to say must get out." He said. "Not a soul, the last thing we need are lots of people getting wild ideas, there are enough things to worry about already."

"Alright, we guarantee to keep quiet." Said Dora.

"What she just said." Added Ish.

"We've just completed the first shuttle." Said Andy. "With luck the entire fleet will be ready in two years, maybe a little longer. Going by the death of Anna's boyfriend, poor Kåre, the Green Death isn't going to give us two years."

"From what I'm learning, that's a good assumption." Said Dora. "I'm hoping to create an antidote to whatever pathogen the aliens are using."

“And I’ll be asking Horace about it too.” Said Ish.

“All wonderful, but we need a fall back plan.” Said Andy. “Under the cover of routine repairs, we’ll be making the campus as air tight as we can. It’ll never be that airtight, we just need to slow the exposure long enough to give us that two years. We’ll bring air in from the outside through a filtration system, which is where you two come in.....We need to know what to make the filter out of.”

He hadn’t expected them to be humble, or apologetic, but they were.

“Of course Andy, we should have been looking at that for months.” Said Ish.

“We can synthesise the green gas now, even though we have no idea what it is yet.” Said Dora.

“Even a simple carbon filter can remove a huge number of noxious substances from the air. We can just do it by trial and error, with a little prod in the right direction from Horace. We must be able to find something that will remove enough of the toxin to give us time to complete the fleet.”

“Sorry Andy, we took our eye off the ball.” Said Ish.

“So you can do it, create a filter to clean the air we breathe?”

“Yes, I’m sure of it.” Said Dora.

Ish just nodded at him and both of them looked so confident. Maybe confidence was infectious, Andy felt better than he had for days. Dora and Ish could be a little eccentric, but when they said they could do something, it invariably happened.

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It was raining in Big Town, a lot of rain, absolutely torrential. There had been a lot of rainy days, but at least that meant Tina wasn’t likely to leave the house until it stopped. And as Tom went where his sister went, Mateo was sure they had the chicken shed to themselves.

“Oh dear, Tom will hate us.” Said Helen.

“I know, but he’s given them all names.” Said Mateo. “He has to learn that the chickens are for the pot. We can hardly feed the damn things as pets for the next....However long they live.”

“Look after them and they can be around for ten years.” Said Helen. “Though we don’t know how old they were when we found them.”

Mateo had thought of his wife as a typical city dweller. Since they’d been in Big Town though, her depth of knowledge about all things wild and natural had astonished him. She must have noticed his expression.

“What ?.....One of my aunts kept chickens.” She said.

“Daphne is going to be the one.” Said Mateo.

“But....Tom loves Daphne.”

“He loves them all, that’s the problem. We’re living off the land now Helen and those who live off the land, don’t keep pet chickens.”

“I’m on your side, honest I am.” Said Helen. “How are you going to do it?”

“Strangulation I suppose, throttle the damn thing.”

“Ewww.”

“I know, I know.”

If only the bird was a little hostile, pecking him maybe. It was so friendly, not objecting at all as Mateo’s fingers ruffled the feathers on its neck. He’d almost worked up the courage to commit chickenocide, when a noise gave Daphne a temporary reprieve. Not a loud noise, it was obviously not that close to Big Town.

“That’s an engine of some kind.” He said

“I know that sound, it’s a helicopter.”

They took a few steps out of the shed, before quickly returning to the slight shelter of a tarpaulin he'd put up so that the chickens could feed in the dry. The helicopter looked to be a long way off, but Helen was right; there was no mistaking that sound. Of course Tina was outside in the pouring rain, pointing at the aircraft as it vanished to the north.

"We know, we saw it Tina." Yelled Helen. "Now get inside before you catch pneumonia."

"No doubt more of those self-appointed rulers of the West Country." He said. "I'm not keen on any military types after the bunker."

"Nor am I, but eventually they will turn up here."

"Then we'll need to be prepared."

Back in the shed and despite him hoping Daphne had made a run for it, she hadn't. The bird actually looked pleased to see them, though that might have been his imagination. He picked her up and gently got a good firm hold of her, before freezing completely.

"If only she was a bit aggressive." He said.

"Do you want me to do it?"

Mateo didn't feel even slightly guilty about handing over Daphne to her executioner. He'd always thought of his wife as a gentle person, but the way she throttled that chicken. Helen quickly grabbed the bird's head and twisted, three or maybe four times. There had been no noise, no outward signs of violence, yet his sweet gentle wife was holding a dead chicken.

"I'm amazed..... Don't tell me, another distant relative ran a chicken abattoir?"

"No, an exchange trip abroad when I was about nineteen. I spent several months at a college in Tianjin in Northern China. One night I saw a woman kill a chicken like that at a street food place. From memory I threw up."

"But you're alright now?" He asked.

"Yes....I guess the memory got stuck somewhere in my mind."

"Any other useful skills locked away in there?"

"Maybe..... Come on, let's get this over. Tom needs to know the bad news now. That way he'll be over the worst by bedtime."

His wife stopped just outside the shed, the rain blowing under the tarpaulin enough to make her blink. She was cradling Daphne in her arms.

"You owe me Mateo Lopez." She said. "I did the deed, but you take the blame. As far as Tom will ever know, you killed his chicken....Agreed?"

And to think his mother hadn't wanted him to marry a British girl, saying they were all too soft.

"Agreed." He said.

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Deb Newman had been a senior accident and emergency nurse at the newly opened York Heworth Hospital. The hospital was probably now a pile of rubble, though the experience of dealing with so many injured people would never leave her. No one else on the campus had experience of dealing with injuries on that kind of almost industrial scale, so they'd given her the clinic to run. Not on her own of course, though there was usually only one nurse on duty at any given time. Mainly minor ailments and the occasional pregnancy, though sometimes an interesting case came in. At the hospital it had always been the slightly strange cases that everyone remembered.

"Do I need to fill in a form, it's personal and a bit embarrassing." He asked.

Personal and embarrassing tended to mean some sort of sexually transmitted diseases, though as they were a fairly insular society in the campus, those were mercifully rare. There had been

occasions at the hospital when personal and embarrassing meant strange things inserted into bottoms. The young man in front of her didn't look the type, but then again, who did ?

"We can do the form as we go, but I will need all the information, before you leave." She said. "Can we start with your name ?"

It wasn't just that she was new, there were a lot of people on the Fifth West Filey Campus. The population had been added to by refugees from the Base Albion moon base and from Norway. Add on a few who drifted in from the outlying campus farms and even Francine didn't claim to know everyone.

"I heard a bad medical history can get you bumped off the shuttles when they leave." He said.

It was true, of course it was true. Space was limited and there was no point in taking someone to a new world who was likely to die within a short time of arriving. It was obvious really and essential, though they weren't putting up posters about it. Necessary yes, but many would start yelling about eugenics. Deb had rehearsed her fairly standard reply in front of a mirror.

"You look young and fit to me, so let's deal with what you came in for...Now I need your name ?"

"Adrian....Adrian Buxton. I'm with the rocket assembly team."

"See, that didn't hurt. Who do you report to ?"

"You're sure I won't get bumped off the shuttle ?"

He was sweating and when she held his hand it was clammy. Probably a panic attack building, but only a fool talks about only a panic attack.

"We need to get you sorted out Adrian." She said. "Would you like coffee ? I still have a secret stock of the good stuff."

"Yes please."

She let him sip at the coffee while she looked him up on the campus database. He was there, complete with a picture that actually looked like him. A biology post grad student who'd been moved over to assembling shuttles, there was a lot of that going on. At least he hadn't given her a false name, there was a lot of that going on too. The rumours about a bad medical history causing people to be left behind were true. Deb had said all along that something needed to be said by JV to make it official. Now there were young people like twenty five year old Adrian who thought that a minor urinary tract infection meant being left behind. It was going to be a sexually transmitted disease, she was sure of it.

"So....Why did you come to see us today ?" She asked.

"It's painful when I pee and.....There's..."

"A discharge maybe ?"

"Yes."

There it was, probably nothing more than an easily treated infection, yet he was worried it would cause him to lose his place on the shuttles. The worry was how many were hiding potentially serious illnesses.

"If it's what I think it is, it can be easily treated." She said. "Though I will need to examine you and get a few samples. I'm afraid I'll also need to speak to your recent sexual partners."

"There's only one, there has only ever been one since I've been here."

"Write down their name, we can be very discreet."

It would take him a while to realise of course, the shock of being diagnosed would fill his mind for a while. Then he'd put two and two together and there'd be a difficult conversation with the one and only lover in his life.

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It was raining, it always seemed to be raining. Their bags were in the hall, as were most of them. Jada kept going for a sit down, but even she had spent a lot of time out in the rain, watching for the return of the coast guard helicopter. Daisy was usually patient, though she too had braved the weather a few times to watch for the arrival of their rescuers.

“Can helicopters fly in the rain ?” Asked Luis.

“They’re the coast guard dad.” Said Alejandro. “They can’t refuse to rescue someone just because it’s raining.”

“Don’t be sarcastic to your father.” Said Jada.

Daisy was happy to sit on her bag in the hallway, watching the others get wet. The agitation of the others was infectious though and the helicopter was late. She couldn’t resist asking...

“Is it far to the coast guard base near Combe Martin ?”

“Nowhere in this part of the West Country is what you’d call far.” Said Steve Penboss. “Just a few miles, a short flight in a helicopter.”

“Brave when you think about it....Flying with those alien saucers about.” Said Jada.

Daisy wanted Jada to shut up, she wanted everyone to shut up. Every word out of every mouth just seemed to create something else to worry about.

“We haven’t seen an alien flying machine in a long time.” Said Steve. “They might not be patrolling around here anymore.”

“They know we’re beaten.” Said Jada. “Nothing left around here to threaten them.”

“You’re not helping.” Snapped Daisy.

“Well really.....I can’t say anything without getting my head bitten off.”

Daisy was ready for a row with Jada, a real up and downer as her mum used to call a really serious row. Then there was the sound they all recognised and little Maria was jumping about in the rain, while pointing at the sky.

“They’re here, they’re here !” She was yelling.

The huge double rotor helicopter stirred up a lot of dirt and loose foliage as it landed. Daisy had trouble keeping the crap from getting into her eyes. As the doors opened she could see another family was already onboard. There was a little confusion as man in uniform insisted on getting all their names on a clipboard, before allowing them to get into the helicopter.

“You’ve too many bags, we’re picking up a lot of people today.” He told them.

“It’s only one bag each.” Said Luis.

“Still too many.....If you want to come, you’ll need to leave two bags behind.”

Daisy only had one small bag, containing everything from her underwear to her lipstick and she wasn’t leaving any of it behind. She grabbed her bag and climbed up inside the helicopter, leaving the others to argue about what did and didn’t go with them. She made eye contact with the oldest woman in the other family, who smiled back.

“We had the same, had to leave a case full of the kid’s clothes.”

“No one is separating me from my underwear, no one.....I’m Daisy by the way, Daisy Lorhan.”

“I’m Jessica Chase..... They picked us up near what’s left of Chulmleigh.”

Jada had to be helped onto the aircraft and began moaning about having to sit on the floor. Daisy gave up on having a proper conversation with Jessica. Maria started crying for some reason that you probably had to be another toddler to understand. The doors closed and without standing, all she could see through the windows was a dark rain sodden sky.

“We’re about to take off.”

The take-off was smooth which was a blessing as there was nothing to hold onto. Once the aircraft was moving smoothly, Steve stood up and looked out of the window, so she joined him.

"At least Maria will have a friend; the other family have a kid about her age." She said.

"If only the rain would stop." Said Steve. "Everything would feel better if we weren't all drenched to the skin."

"We're landing for a pickup."

They only seemed to have been in the air for a few minutes, when they began to circle a group of people stood outside an isolated farmhouse. About six or seven people, waving furiously at the helicopter. Maria really was going to be alright for friends, the new people had two children with them.

"Wait until they're told to leave a case or two behind." Muttered Steve.

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Strangely enough the campus online library had nothing at all on learning how to talk to aliens.

There were a lot of famous books on cognitive processes, but most of it was theoretical, the stuff so beloved of post graduate students. Ishmael McGrath realised he'd struck gold when he found a whole section of the library based around teaching languages to children with learning difficulties. He'd sat up half the night reading every wonderful word, until Biff interrupted him.

"I needed to pee, but crap Ish.....It's three thirty. Come to bed, that's an order."

"I've found what I needed Biff, I need to be more literal with Horace, more obvious. Even complex abstract ideas can be broken down into simple chunks.....I should have realised that."

"Yeah great. Just be in bed by the time I get back from the having a pee."

Ish went to bed, crawling under the sheet that was still warm and smelt of his lover. He wasn't going to be able to sleep of course; his head was too full of ideas. His head had only just hit the pillow before he was into a deep and untroubled sleep.

"You know Horace better than I do. Call me if it works."

Biff had shouted to him as she'd left their campus apartment the next morning. He was up late of course, though Inka's kids now had a keycard to get in. The pen where Horace was kept had always been a bit special. They could hardly house an intelligent creature in the same conditions as the livestock. Since the kids had been cleaning her out though, everything glinted. There were still a few weird smells, but Horace probably thought they smelled weird too.

"Hi Kata....Antun....Do you fancy rushing all over the campus today ? I need you to collect some things for me. Green things."

Their eyes lit up, he'd guessed they'd love an excuse to spend some time away from the pens.

"Why green things ?" Asked Kata.

"For a long time it was debated that what I see and call green, might not be what you see and call green." Said Ish.

"That's silly." Said Antun.

"You might be right Antun. But a lot of people worked on it and came to the conclusion that what every human calls green, is perceived as the same colour. There is still a lot of uncertainty about animals...Though of course some can only see in black and white."

"Which ones ?" Asked Antun.

Ish had thought that Inka's kid's eyes would begin to glaze over when he started talking about the theory of colour vision. Not a bit of it, they both seemed keen to hear more, but they had been stuck in the pens for a while, mopping up alien poo.

“Dogs don’t see colour at all well.” Said Ish. “A bit of yellow and blue maybe, but mostly they see the world in black and white.”

“That’s dreadful.” Said Kata.

“Dogs seem to get by pretty well.” Said Ish. “I want to teach Horace the word for Green, so I want you to scour the campus for green objects. Small green objects, nothing that you can’t hold in one hand. A cup maybe, or a pen, maybe a book with a green cover....Surprise me.”

He knew saying surprise me was a mistake as soon as he’d said it. They’d turn it into a competition to see who could find the most obscure green object, but at least they were keen.

“Great, it’ll be fun.” Said Kata. “But some people will tell us to go away.”

“I’m sure they will. Tell them you’re working for me and it’s important. As soon as you leave I’ll call Francine and let her know she might get a few angry calls. Stand your ground, we need those green objects.”

Again he knew he was asking for trouble. He’d just given the Malovic kids a license to go anywhere and annoy anyone.

“How many green things do you need ?” Asked Antun.

“About a dozen, take one of the backpacks with you. I need you to do it quickly too, no taking all day over it.”

“We won’t Ish....You can count on us.” Said Kata.

Ish fed Horace, read a little more and added to a notebook on his desk that was simply titled ‘Horace.’ The phone had rung three times after he’d warned Francine that he’d just sent two keen teenagers on a sort of treasure hunt. He never picked up the phone, he wasn’t stupid. Three angry messages, all from Archibald in Finance, saying two kids had grabbed his green wallet and told him Ish needed it for Horace.

“Wait until we get to the obscure end of the spectrum.” Muttered Ish. “Finding things that are indigo might mean taking the place apart.”

The phone rang again and then again. There were about seven messages by the time Kata and Antun returned, maybe eight, he’d lost count. The whole exercise had taken them just over ninety minutes.

“We did it, a dozen green objects.” Said Kata, handing him a backpack.

There was cup, a pen and of course Archibald’s green wallet. Ish would make sure that was returned after he’d finished with it. A cog wheel painted green, a glass paperweight that was probably someone’s treasured desk ornament.

“Wow, you guys did well.” Said Ish.

“We collected thirteen objects.” Said Antun.

“We weren’t sure about the dice.” Added Kata.

A set of seven gaming dice in metal effect green.

“Hmmm might be interesting to see what Horace makes of them.”

A green plastic spatula, a green biscuit barrel, though Ish put its metal lid to one side. He ended up with a good assortment of green objects on his table, though the kids were right about the dice.

They probably would confuse the hell out of Horace. Different shades of green though and he wasn’t sure how Horace might see colour. Crap, Horace might have no colour vision at all, or see everything as shades of green.

“Ish you idiot, keep it simple, one step at a time.” He muttered.

“Are you alright Ish ?” Asked Kata. “We did it right, didn’t we ?”

“Yes, you both did very well. Do you want to stay and watch ? It will mean being quiet when I talk to Horace.”

“Yes please.” Said Kata.

Antun just nodded, as they dragged over a couple of chairs and made themselves comfortable. Ish quickly selected six of the objects, almost at random. The dice he rejected, along with a clear glass jar full of an unknown green liquid. He placed a green cup on the low table in front of Horace.

“Cup.” He said.

Horace was an old hand at the game now. Ish didn’t know the exact size of Horace’s English vocabulary, though it had to be about the same as a bright child of seven or eight. No colours though and few abstract ideas. Horace made the sound that meant cup in her language. It might well mean vessels that hold liquids, but he was learning to keep it simple. He put the green pen on the shelf and again Horace already knew what it was. Eventually Horace had identified and given her word for six objects, a few of them new words.

“Good, wonderful.” He said. “Are you two still with me.”

“Yes.” Said Kata, for both of them.

“This is where it gets interesting, or I end up looking like an idiot. The problem is that I don’t think Horace is likely to have played charades.”

There were no facial expressions with Horace, though Ish seemed to sense some of her emotions. Probably something associated with the extra bit of brain stem the original Horace had given him. Ish placed all six objects on the table, all in a straight line. He had her attention, Horace knew the game was moving up a gear. Ish placed both his hands above the objects, palms down. He then circled the objects with his hands hoping Horace knew he meant the whole thing, everything on the table. He made the same movement four times, before placing his right hand, palm down over the table.

“Green.”

Please, oh please understand you crazy alien...Please know what I want. It took a while with Horace moving from side to side. Eventually she made a sound that might mean green, he had to do the usual routine and replicate the result. It definitely wasn’t the sound for ‘I don’t know crazy human, you’re confusing me.’ He now knew that sound by hearts from the early days of teaching her. Ish circled the objects twice, before placing his hand, palm down over the table.

“Green.”

The same sound from Horace and Kata gasped. She knew how important that same sound being said twice was. Ish needed to cross check though, before telling the AI to definitely add green to Horace’s known vocabulary. He removed all the objects and put back just the green cup. He stared at Horace, hoping she had the right idea and not some weird idea that waving his hands about meant green. He placed his right hand over the cup.

“Green.”

The same sound again, she understood her first English word for a colour, a main colour from the human visual spectrum. That implied so much about the way her visual system worked, but there was no time to go down that road. His one and only concern was finding a way to cure or mitigate the effects of the green death. He hugged Horace and had the impression she quite liked being hugged.

“You did it.” Said Kata.

“We did it, none of it could have been done without the objects. By the way, where did you get the green liquid ?”

“It’s not biological; they wouldn’t let us in there.” Said Kata. “It came from the rocket people.”

“Then please take it straight back there please and Archibald’s wallet. Have some lunch and we’ll move onto the next step this afternoon.”

He wanted them out of the way for something he wanted to try, there was no way of telling how the alien might react. Plus he was about to make himself look totally ridiculous, but it was in the name of interplanetary communications. First he used the keyboard to confirm the new words the AI had identified, including green.

“Now Horace old buddy, you might not like this bit.” He muttered.

How to portray death as though he was making a video for a golden oldie stadium rock tune. He’d seen so many of them, all dreadful. A gang of dancers miming while carrying out actions to illustrate the song. They were all funny because they were usually so literal. That was what he needed to do to define death, even if it was going to make him look like a crazy person. He patted Horace on the head.

“This is between you and I Horace.”

She knew her name and usually reacted. She rubbed what was probably the left side of her face against his hand. Or at least what was probably her face. Ish lay on the ground in front of her and went through a pretend spasm, before sticking his arms and legs straight up in the air. She had to get it, a kid of five would understand it.

“Death.”

Oh she understood alright. Horace was trying to retreat away from him. There were strong wires to secure the various spheres attached to her body. Luckily the wires stopped her from retreating too far from him. There was a word though, that sounded like two words linked together. Ish had to be sure, even if poor Horace had a breakdown. He did the whole spasm thing, before sticking his arms and legs up in the air.

“Death.”

Back came the same very long sound. He didn’t verify it again; her reaction told him that he could confirm to the AI, that they now knew the alien word for death. Ish knelt close to Horace, his human face barely an inch away from her very, very alien face.

“Green.....Death.”

Horace reacted by a torrent of words the AI couldn’t keep up with or understand.

“Not Me.....Ishmael.....Not Me.”

The gaps between the words the AI could understand became shorter, as it tried to use words it knew to guess at words it didn’t. Considering no one on the planet had ever heard Horace’s language before, it made a passable attempt. The result was word salad, but Ish understood the intent.

“Not Me Ishmael.....Not My Intent.....Not Me.....Not Me.....Not Me.....Not Me.”

He hugged Horace and tried to sooth her.

“I know.....Not You.....The other Horace was a conscript too.”

Eventually Horace stopped tugging against the wires and seemed to relax. Once he was certain she wasn’t going to harm herself, he sent Biff a message on the campus network.

‘Horace understand what the green death will do. I’m now certain she will help us.’

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