

Ishmael II : Pandora

Chapter 18 – Home Again

“After quite a lot of discussion and plans about where to run to if the alien creatures came looking for them, Judy was sat on the roof of a burned-out supermarket.”



They'd been following the coastline for a while, not wanting to lose sight of it, but not wanting to get too close. Bren had convinced him that deep water meant safety and an unknown coastline meant danger. Doug had agreed with her of course and had told them a few stories about boats being ripped apart by unseen rocks, or pushed onto rocks by dangerous currents. All the stories seemed to include several warnings about rocky coastlines. No obvious landmarks had appeared as the morning haze cleared, so Matt was using the best guess by the navigation system, along with his growing knowledge of how to interpret charts.

“Oh crap, where the hell are we ?” He muttered.

“That doesn't sound encouraging.” Said Ela.

When Matt had flung the charts out over the table, he'd assumed he had the room to himself. Ela came over and looked at the two sugar cubes he'd used as markers.

“According to the navigation system we're here.” He said, pointing. “But if we are, the Isle of Wight should be in the way.”

“Ok, I get that..... Where do you think we are Matt ?”

“Here, Just south of Hengistbury Head and a place called Mudeford, where we came for a holiday when I was about six or seven.”

“Hmmm Hampshire.” Said Ela, as she looked at the charts. “Who is usually right, you or the navigation system ?”

“Well, neither of us know the windspeed and currents.....But I think I'm slightly ahead.”

“And there is no Isle of Wight in the way.”

“Ok Ela, you've convinced me, we're going ashore at Mudeford.....I hope.”

Bren just nodded when he told her to head north towards Hengistbury Head. Her faith in him was nice, he just hoped it wasn't misplaced. Matt breathed a huge sigh of relief when the massive headland came into view. It had to be Hengistbury Head, there was nothing else like it in the area.

“It'll be strange to be home again.” Said Doug. “I haven't set foot in England since.....I think Euro 2066 was being played.”

“Wow, there have been a few changes since then.” Said Bren.

“It all looks so.....Normal.” Said Matt.

There was a Hengistbury Head tourist centre, complete with a café. Matt had been there as a kid and the coastline looked just the same. By the time Bren took them closer in to use Mudeford Quay, it was as though the alien invasion had never happened. Closer to the harbour it was possible to see a little fire damage to one of the buildings, though it wasn't that bad. The worst damage was a wrecked boat at the ferry terminal, though whatever had happened, seemed to have happened a long time ago.

“People must have had time to move their boats.” Said Doug.

“Where do you think they went to ?” Asked Ela.

"Who knows.....Maybe the Isle of Wight." Said Doug. "Or maybe they just went further along the coast."

"The town looks fairly intact too." Said Matt. "We should do a little looting while we're here."

"Can we have a night on dry land.....Please." Said Ela. "Just one night in a proper bed.....Please."

"I'd quite like that too." Said Bren.

There was a twinkle in Bren's eye as she said it, a definite look in his direction. The Eleanor had decent beds, but a night in a large double bed somewhere in Mudeford would be like Christmas come early.

"I don't see why we couldn't spend one night ashore, before moving on." He said.

"Still planning on going to Filey then ?" Asked Doug.

"Yes, it's why I've crossed half the globe."

Doug was giving him a serious look, almost asking 'what about Bren ?' with just his eyes. It was weird to be taking his lover with him on a trip to join up with his wife. He knew it was weird, but it had been his plan for so long.

"I'm going to Filey too." Said Ela.

"We'll need to take weapons, even if Mudeford does look fairly safe." Said Matt. "No getting careless when we've made it all the way home."

Matt looked them over before they walked into the town of Mudeford. He'd enjoyed some of the holiday there as a kid, though his main memory was of rainy days, lots of rainy days.

"Do you remember much about the place ?" Asked Bren.

"Not really.....There was a café that did wonderfully knickerbocker glories."

"What's that ?" Asked Ela.

"Ice cream Ela, lots of different flavours, with....."

By the time he'd explained and Ela was saying she really wanted to try one, they were in the centre of Mudeford. Mudeford Road to be exact, which linked into Mudeford Lane. It seemed that whoever had founded the town, was a little lacking in imagination. So far Matt had seen no signs of life, not even a twitching curtain. The army had trained him well, he'd survived in places where a twitching curtain might mean a sniper. No way to be completely certain, but he thought they might well be the only living humans in Mudeford.

"We'll find a house first, somewhere as a base for the night." Said Matt. "Then we'll go and see what's left in the shops."

"A nice house." Said Ela.

"Yes, we want a really nice house." Added Bren.

They found a nice large house about two hundred yards further along Mudeford Lane. Two floors and a fairly new build, there had to be at least three or four bedrooms and a decent kitchen. There were also a lot of solar panels on the roof. Once common, though later innovations had meant they were now rare. They did have one big advantage, which Bren understood as well as he did.

"Give me five minutes and we just might.....Have some power." Said Bren.

"That'll be brilliant." Said Ela.

The front of the house was locked and secure, but a good shove and the rear patio doors began to bulge inward. A knife pushed into the lock and twisted, coupled with a good hard shove by him and Bren.....And they were inside.

"This place is beautiful." Said Bren.

"A bit of luxury for once." Added Doug.

The house was no better than the one he and Deb had once owned in Yorkshire, before yet another posting to yet another base, had made it simpler to sell the house and live in army accommodation. The house was nice, but it wasn't all that special. It was simply that they'd all been living off the land for so long, happy for anywhere safe to sleep. Bren was as good as her word, they had power before they'd decided on who had which bedroom.

"Nothing fancy in the way of power, the storage cells are a bit old. But we'll have a few lights tonight." Said Bren.

Whoever had owned the house had managed a controlled exit, they'd even unplugged the fridge and left the door open. Plenty of tins in cupboards though and some decent tea and coffee. Well out of date of course, but still in their foil packaging.

"Can we stay a week?" Asked Ela.

"We leave in the morning." Said Matt.

Power meant it was impossible not to have proper coffee and a cooked late breakfast. Only heated up tins of beans and burgers, though eating off proper plates in a proper kitchen, made it special. By the time they left to go looting, Matt was feeling confident about them all reaching Filey in one piece.

The eight people walking towards them along Pinehurst Avenue seemed unreal for a split second, as though he must have imagined them. Two adults, both armed, with several children following behind. There was also an elderly man, who needed a walking stick.

Either they weren't used to using weapons, or they didn't want the kids caught in a fire fight. The two adults, one male, one female, hadn't even reached for their weapons. Instead, they were looking in horror in the direction of Ela.

Incredible reflexes for a girl still recovering from a serious injury, she had her disruptor aimed at the group of people. Even if you'd never seen a disruptor before, its general shape and size screamed dangerous weapon. Primarily designed to kill alien bots, it could just as easily kill humans. It burned flesh, stopped hearts and did terrible things to the human brain. Anything in the body that needed electrical signals to pass down nerves. As a Fifth West fighter had once told him.

"Like putting people in a microwave for five minutes, on high."

Matt put his hand on Ela's arm and very gently pushed down.

"No Ela, they're just people.....They're like us."

It took a few seconds, until Ela seemed to relax and lowered the disruptor.

"I'm sorry." She said.

Could he blame her? She'd seen too much in the seventeen years or so she'd been alive. It crossed his mind that they'd all missed a birthday somewhere and she might be eighteen. So many terrible things had come at her out of left field, so many dangerous things wanting to kill her. The other group were now smiling, everyone was smiling at everyone else. Time for introductions.

"Hi, I'm Matt."

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None of it would have happened if Tirsa Bates hadn't been a bit of a Magpie. Judy had been invited to stay with the Bates family for a while and of course where she went, Rod went. There had been no intention of trying to contact Fifth West and her daughter, they had no comms technology apart from a small radio that hadn't picked up a commercial broadcast in years. There had been a few conversations about getting the radio in the old abandoned army tank to work.

"Probably only twelve or twenty four volts." Tyler had said. "We have batteries and I'm sure we can rig something up."

Tirsa and her brother soon discovered that when the army fitted comms equipment, they meant it to stay fitted. After a lot of hard work, they eventually gave up on removing the radio from the tank. It really had been a non-starter; the antenna went with the radio and that had been blown apart by whatever had disabled the tank. Then there was the idea of taking the cradle full of batteries to the tank.

“Makes you a sitting duck if they track the transmission.” Liza had said.

Judy Gray had accepted that getting in touch with her daughter was probably impossible, until Tirsa remembered something she’d found over a year before, while scouting the nearby town with her brother. It was in an upstairs room of their house, tucked away on a shelf, behind tins of kidney beans.

“The soldier was dead, but when I saw the FW Logo.” Tirsa had told her. “I knew their kit was really good and thought it might be useful one day.”

The homemade battery cradle had been modified and they were almost sure a twelve-volt supply would do the trick.

“We’ll need to keep moving around, or they’ll spot us.” According to Zane.

After quite a lot of discussion and plans about where to run to if the alien creatures came looking for them, Judy was sat on the roof of a burned-out supermarket. Not as exposed as she’d thought, there was a water tank and two aircon units to duck behind. Getting onto the roof had been easier than she’d thought too, though getting down in a hurry ? She hoped that was something that didn’t happen.

“We’ll try here, then move a bit further south.” Said Tirsa.

The Fifth West comms and its antenna were built into the helmet with FW on the side. As far as they could tell, taking the thing apart was well beyond their technical ability. Tyler had managed to rig up the cabling though, to link a small heap of old batteries to the high-tech comms system.

“I just hope it has the range to reach.....Someone.” Said Judy.

“Fifth West makes the best stuff.” Said Tirsa. “It has to reach someone.”

“Yeah, Fifth West are the best.” Added Zane.

The little yellow pills probably had something to do with their admiration of Fifth West, but their excitement was rubbing off on her. Judy felt slightly absurd wearing a combat helmet, but putting it on gave her even more confidence. It was going to work, she was going to see Pandora again, she was certain. Judy pressed what, by general consensus, was probably the transmit button.

“It’s doing something.” Said Tirsa.

The visor on the helmet began to glow and several bright yellow dots appeared. Brilliant, probably, if she had the slightest clue what they signified.

“Hello.....This is Judy Gray. Can anyone hear me ?”

Nothing, not even the crackle of static. Judy counted to a hundred in her head, slowly, before trying again.

“Hello.....Anyone.....This is Judy Gray.....Please respond.”

Nothing, though Judy thought she could hear a conversation going on, somewhere. It was odd, like listening to people talking in the next room.

“We should move before trying again.” Said Tirsa.

“Just a moment, there is something there.”

When the voice arrived, it came with a series of characters on the visor. The helmet seemed to find the caller interesting and began to put up all sorts of information, most of it useless to her. Just knowing the source of the voice though, that meant they were probably friendly.

“Judy..... Who are you ? This is a restricted frequency.”

A male voice and the sound of engines, probably a helicopter. Judy noticed the yellow dot on her screen was moving.

“I am Judy Gray, mother of Pandora Gray.....I am using the helmet of a dead Fifth West soldier to call you.”

“Repeat your name.”

“I am Judy Gray.”

There was more noise of engines and the sound of him talking to someone. It seemed to take him a long time to reply to her. All the time Tirsas was becoming more and more anxious. The yellow dot was almost off the edge of the visor by the time he spoke to her.

“Judy, are you still there ?”

“Yes.”

“In twelve hours, at twenty one thirty hours, you need to call from a different location.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Get higher if you can, it will help. Now you should move from your current location.”

“Yes, I will.”

The visor lost the yellow dot and Tirsas was pulling at her. Getting down the steps from the roof was awkward, Judy took them slowly, despite the looks of anxiety on Tirsas’s face. The whoops of delight and a little jumping for joy came when they were in the woods, a long way from the supermarket.

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Lianne was happy she’d found everything on her list of items required to finish getting The Nostromo into space. As for leaving Electronics School 1707 ? She hadn’t found a sealed room full of super weapons, she hadn’t really expected to. For years the Russian Federation had made up for a lack of money for research, by having a good imagination. Not everything was just PR, they had produced some good technology. The school though.....It had turned out something their country really needed, skilled engineers and electronics experts.

“I’m going to miss this place.” She said.

Nigel just smiled at her, as he picked up his pack and disruptor. He’d been a pleasant interlude, a harmless fling. Her father wouldn’t be happy if the fling carried on and developed into something more than a fling. Upsetting her father wasn’t new though. She’d already taken so many pictures of the school, that all she had to do was pick up her things and leave. Barwood put his head around the door to the room she’d turned into a love nest. She didn’t think he knew where it was, but people talk.

“We need to leave.” Said Barwood. “We’ve already been here too long.”

“Go ahead, I want a last look around.” Said Lianne.

“I’ve already checked that nothing has been left behind.”

“Go ahead Sergeant Barwood.”

He left without a smile or saying another word. He’d been getting weirder since they’d arrived at the school, something she’d have thought was impossible.

“Can’t you get your dad to do something about him ?”

“My dad likes him Nigel, that’s a huge part of the problem.”

Lianne took a few moments to look at the photo wall again, wondering how many people with happy smiling faces, were still alive. It was good that she had dawdled a little, she was in the right spot to see the drone, as it hovered close by. A grey coloured drone with about six spinning propellers. She’d never have seen it if the morning sun hadn’t flashed off its underside.

“Do you see that ?” She asked, pointing.

“Yes, just.....It’s our drone.”

“Not ours, we haven’t flown it since coming here. It would give away our position.”

“It must be ours; everyone would be going crazy if it wasn’t.”

“They probably haven’t seen it. Shoot it Nigel, use your disruptor.”

“Are you sure ?”

“Yes I am, shoot the damn thing.”

He still didn’t look convinced, though he did raise his heavy disruptor and fire it at the drone. An easy kill for such a weapon, the explosion was probably the drone’s batteries coming apart. She’d seen alien drones; they were far tougher and just sparked a little if they were hit.

“Come on, it came down not that far away.” She said.

An exploding drone is hard to miss or ignore. By the time she was stood over the debris, Barwood was close behind, as were several armed soldiers.

“Crap.....Where did that come from ?” Someone asked.

“It was just good luck that I saw it.” Said Lianne. “Whoever it belonged to might have been watching us since we arrived.”

“Definitely not alien.” Said Barwood.

The remains of six cameras, someone had been very interested in them. One fragment of a circuit board was particular interesting.

“A Russian part number.” Said Bobby. “Definitely not alien.”

“We’re in St Petersburg, just about everything has a Russian part number.” Said Lianne.

“Might be well equipped bandits.” Said Barwood. “We do know some of the old mafia types are still operating in the area.”

“We should leave here now.” She said. “Everyone needs to stay alert and remember that if you see a drone.....Shoot at it, because it isn’t ours.”

Lianne took up her favourite position in the APC, a place where she could view the outside world through a flap, rather than on a screen. The Vasileostrovsky District was awkward to get in or out of, they’d realised that on the way in. The only route out was the one they’d created on the way to the school. Every turn in the road was a chance for someone to ambush them. Every pile of burned out vehicles might be cover for an enemy with a rocket launcher. There was no trouble though, none at all. Until she saw the trucks blocking off the bridge to the mainland. At least four fairly old looking trucks, with armed men scattered around. In front of them was a tall thin man.

“He’s waving at us.” Said Nigel.

“We could try another bridge.” Said Bobby.

“By the time we clear a road to get there, our new friend will be waiting there.” Said Nigel.

“He obviously wants to talk, so let’s talk to him.” Said Barwood.

Such an un-Barwood thing for him to say, that Lianne wondered if she’d been underestimating him a little. He was right of course, it was a choice between going out there with all guns blazing, or find out what the tall thin guy wanted. On the whole, Lianne preferred the talking option.

“Yes, we go and find out what he wants.” Said Lianne.

She was expecting all the objections to her going, which of course she ignored. Getting to see the enemy up close was important, it would enable her to see if they were all bluster, or a serious threat. None of the armed men near the trucks were in uniform, though a few wore tattered bits from uniforms. Like the trucks, their weapons looked quite old, more twenty thirties than twenty seventies. It might have all been a clever ruse of course, with the state-of-the-art weapons hidden

close by, but she doubted it. She was certain the reason the tall thin guy hadn't attacked them in a narrow street in the Vasileostrovsky District, was because he might well lose the battle. He waited until they were very close, before greeting them in flawless English. Lianne wondered if the drone had been listening to them, as well as taking pictures.

"I am Colonel Ivan Antonov and I have been given the defence of St Petersburg as my sworn duty. From the ocean in the west to Vsevolozhsk in the east. From Mensary in the north, right down to the Moskovsky District in the south. Everything is under my control. You have stolen from the people of the Russian Federation; our drones have witnessed it."

There was a lot of PT Barnum in Ivan and Lianne liked him, mainly because he obviously wanted to make a deal. All the bullshit was to make them take him seriously. There was no Russian Federation anymore, there were no more federations anywhere, unless the aliens had one.

"So, colonel, what do you want from us?" She asked.

"I could ask for your APC in compensation, but I won't. I merely want one of your trucks and even then, I will offer you something in trade.....Something that I think will be of interest to you."

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Ela was fed up with everyone assuming she'd be glad to see other young people.

"Someone to talk to other than us old uns." Bren had said to her.

She never had particularly liked the company of other children, when she'd actually been one. Now she was an adult, yet everyone expected her to love the company of teenagers. Plus, the boy who called himself Butch was pestering her a bit and he looked to be about fourteen.....Fourteen ! When he put his hand on her arm, it was the final straw.

"Do that again Butch and you'll lose a finger or two."

Ela held up her wicked looking blade, just to make sure he took her threat seriously. Butch almost ran out of the kitchen to join everyone in the lounge.

"That was a bit unkind."

Sophia seemed to be the matriarch of the group they'd come across, the alpha female as Doug had once referred to her. She wasn't Butch's mother, but one of the small girls was hers, Ela still had trouble remembering which.

"Sorry, he was just being a nuisance." Said Ela. "I would never hurt him."

"I know."

"I bet his name isn't even Butch."

"Actually it's Kevin, but don't tell him I told you that."

"Yes, he looks like a Kevin." Said Ela.

Sophia laughed with her and Ela began to think she might be alright after all. They were all so different to them, but they hadn't seen that many other people since.....It had to be since Sri Lanka. Karim had stolen her heart there, even if his family hadn't liked the idea of them being together.

"Please do me a favour." Said Sophia. "Be a little nicer to him, he hasn't seen a woman he isn't related to in a long time, or one old enough to be his mother."

"I'll try."

"Thank you.....We should join the others, or you'll miss Fabian talking about the yellow pills."

"What yellow pills."

"Oh you won't like them, they make you puke, but they will save your life."

Fabian was with Sophia, though she wasn't the mother of his little girl. It was a complicated group and Ela was still getting to know them. Bringing them back to the house had been a good idea, it

gave everyone a chance to relax. And there was wine at the house, the universal inhibitions remover. All the adults in the lounge seemed to be mildly tipsy.

“Electric light, I used to take it for granted.” Mumbled Sophia. “Now it feels like a magic trick, or some kind of miracle.”

Fabian was holding up a plastic container, which Matt seemed very interested in.

“You don’t need to take more than one a year, everyone ignores the directions.” Said Fabian.

“Where can we get some ?” Asked Bren.

“We can give you a few. Fifth West are making them, everyone knows that. If you’re going to a Fifth West base in Yorkshire, they’re bound to have boxes of them.” Said Fabian.

“Thanks.....We hadn’t heard about the Green Death.” Said Doug.

“Just in case you think we’re trying to poison you.” Said Sophia.

She took a pill out of the container Fabian was holding and swallowed it. After that display of good faith, she handed the container to Bren.

“You’ve enough there to last for years....In case you never find that Fifth West base in Yorkshire.”

“Your guts will be bad for days.” Said Fabian. “The instructions tell you to rest for two or three days and drink plenty of fluids.”

“Yeah right.” Said Doug. “It makes you wonder if the Fifth West people ever see what’s going on in the real world.”

The grown-ups looked to be settling in for a long conversation about the Green Death, the yellow pills and the general annoyance at corporations like Fifth West. Ela sat on the same three-seater sofa as Butch, AKA Kevin. Not next to him of course, she had her standards. She did look at him though and smile, before listening to Fabian talking about bad guts and puking, yet again.

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The creature that had been and probably still contained a lot of Vicky Meadows, had intended to use the borrowed Chinese Shuttle to get her to Western Europe. The one she’d taken from the Mao Zedong Moon Base. She was going to land in style, probably somewhere near Paris. She was going to do a Hemingway and liberate the city all on her own, though she’d take a few thousand of her kind with her. The shuttle was so far behind the front line though and it had been left open to the elements and the jungle for so long. It probably wouldn’t work now and if it did, it was likely to be unsafe.

“We’re here Einer.....It has taken so long, but we’re finally here. My father was born near here, before his family moved to Britain.”

Einer muttered to her guards in the language that was roughly English, with a lot of their own words added in. It had to happen, her children’s, children’s, children were adapting, changing. Some looked quite different to the original children she’d given birth to on lunar. Most could speak perfect English, but eventually they’d just speak their own language. It was right, it was inevitable, but it still made Vicky sad. Her children were now more numerous than grains of sand in the desert and tens of thousands of them were with her. Vicky was stood on the town green in the centre of Coulommiers, just a few miles east of Paris. Her children were eager to fight and they were also hungry. She was about to issue an order that, with luck, would deal with their hunger. Alien Bio-Bot flesh wasn’t very nutritious, but eat enough of it.....

“Attack.....Go my children....Destroy every alien creature in Paris.”

The word would go along the line from mouth to mouth, it might be a while until her people to the north and south began to move towards the city. Vicky let her children go past her, their numbers enough to make the ground vibrate slightly as they marched past her.

“Go, go join them Einer, I can see you want to.” She said.

“I will stay with you Vicky.”

Brute force, attacking in their thousands, all with an almost impenetrable hide, fast reflexes and rows of teeth harder than steel. That was how her people waged battle against the alien hordes. They had a few control boxes to take over the alien robots, though often it was far easier to simply rip their enemy apart.

Never humans though, never....Ever humans. If there was one rule, one moral certainty she'd passed onto her genetic line, it was that humans were never to be killed. Ignore them if they're presence is a nuisance, perhaps even feed on their dead, her people were always hungry. No killing though.....Never.

“The aliens have a liking for Paris, though why is unclear.” Said Einer. “Deep bunkers everywhere and a large number of their mechanical beings. Some aircraft, though not as many as we feared. Still.....We will have a hard job rooting them out of their bunkers.....”

“And many of our people will die.....Yes, I know that Einer, without you saying it. Once we have taken Paris though, every centre they have in Europe will begin to fall. So, we start to dig in Paris, we get down into those bunkers and tear them apart with our teeth and claws. I promise you my first-born female, you will taste the flesh of an alien. Though be ready for it to taste terrible.”

“I look forward to that day.” Said Einer.

Einer laughed, it looked like her weird sense of humour was rubbing off on her children. Paris was likely to be destroyed in the attack, all that history gone, all those famous buildings. It bothered Vicky, though not unduly. Mankind was about to leave for a new home in the stars, where no doubt they'd create more history, more art and with luck, more writers like Hemingway.

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It made sense really, to open the attic window and climb out onto the roof. She'd been asked to get higher and once she was up there on the tiles, the Bates house looked to be the tallest building for miles. It was also the only building in what looked like an ocean of trees. A tree quite near to the house was a good ten feet higher, though she had no intention of even trying to climb it.

“There was a moment, when I thought we'd have to break the window.” Said Tyler.

“Attics get neglected, it's a fact of life.” Said Judy.

An attic window that had refused to open and a roof at an angle steep enough to make her want to hang onto the edge of the window. Judy was there though, on the roof with her radio and a few minutes to spare. She put on the helmet and adjusted the visor to keep the breeze off her face. At the agreed time she gave Tyler Bates a thumbs up sign and clicked the transmit button. Instantly the visor was full of information she didn't understand.

“Hello.....This is Judy Gray.”

“We're fixing your location Judy, so please keep transmitting.” Said a male voice. “I have someone here who wants to talk to you.”

There were two yellow blobs on the visor, both of them moving away from her. Were they Fifth West aircraft looking for her ?

“Hello mum, is that really you ?”

A little distorted, though there was no mistaking her daughter's voice.

“Oh Dora, I never thought I'd hear your voice again.”

“Where are you ? Is dad with you ?”

“I'm in Kent Dora.....Your dad died.....I'm so sorry. He joined a local defence militia, silly thing to do at his age. He just.....He never came home after a patrol.”

“Oh shit mum.”

Her daughter was crying and after not hearing her voice for so long, even the sound of weeping was welcome.

“Are you on your own mum ?”

“I found the Bates family, or they found me. They told me about the yellow pills. I’m travelling with Rod, you’ll like him.”

“Oh, who is he mum ?”

“Can we talk about that when we meet ? Are you still with Ish ?”

“Yes mum, I’m still with Ish.....They have your location and I’m told a scavenger team will be able to pick you up just after dawn tomorrow.”

“But the house is surrounded by trees.”

“They’ll find you mum, they’re good at that.”

“Can I bring the Bates family if they want to come ?”

“Yes, I’ll even make sure they get a place on a shuttle.”

“What shuttle ?”

“Something else to talk about when you get here. Disconnect now mum, we know where you are.....Love you.”

“Love you too dear.”

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Colonel Ivan Antonov had invited them to see his base, as if trying to convince them he really was, or had been, part of the Russian Federation’s armed forces. His troops still had surprisingly good morale, considering they’d had no contact with anyone in authority for several years. Mostly men with a smattering of women, they seemed very interested in hearing news from the outside world. By the time they reached their base on the coast near Peski, Lianne no longer thought of Ivan and his men as hostiles. Still professional and still soldiers, but definitely friendly.

“We receive radio transmissions, but never transmit.” Said Ivan.

He had power and lots of it, from a small reactor in the basement. Despite neglect and zero routine maintenance the reactor and its generator gave Ivan and his people more power than they could ever need. It seemed that there was a roster to make sure the radio receivers were monitored around the clock, just in case. As with so much of the world after the invasion, Ivan couldn’t give a clear idea about in case of what. The comms room was impressive though, like something out of a spy movie.

“When I was given control of the defences for the region, the screen showed activity everywhere, now there are just a few hotspots.” Said Ivan. “Mostly in the far east, where the United Arab armies are still fighting and winning the occasional battle. They were nearly beaten until these devil creatures arrived, or at least what everyone is calling devils.”

“We’ve heard of them.” Said Lianne.

“Ferocious and by the sound of it, on our side.” Said Ivan. “We keep hearing transmission saying they don’t harm humans. They’ve been winning a lot of battles, though not all. They’ve no answer to high level bombing it seems, though I bet they’re working on it.”

“You think they’re that intelligent ?” Asked Barwood.

“Yes, definitely. We probably have them to thank for seeing less attacks these days, especially from the air. We still have to be careful, but the aliens have definitely moved their resources further east, to fight the devils. There are rumours of the aliens being completely driven out of Vietnam. We have a few people with several languages, but there is so much we don’t understand.”

“Could we have recordings of what you’ve received ?” Asked Lianne.

“I’ll do you a deal Lianne Verga.” Said Ivan. “Accept the trade for a truck and you can have every radio communication we’ve received since the alien armada arrived.”

So, his drones had been listening as well as watching. Not that him knowing she was JV’s daughter changed anything.

“What is it you have to trade ?” She asked.

“The easiest way is to show you.”

She’d forgotten they were on the coast and after going down a few floors, they were in an enclosed dock with a huge set of doors to give access to the sea. There were a few small boats that didn’t look to have been used in a very long time, one was half submerged. In the centre of the dock was a huge vessel unlike anything Lianne had ever seen before. There was something about it though, something trying to find a way out of her memory, a brilliant design her dad had once talked about.

“This.....Is Ekranoplan Vengeance.” Said Ivan. “Though the name sounds far better in Russian. The motors work well and its surprisingly easy to fly, or so I’m told. I’d say it’s definitely a good trade for your truck.”

“I’ve heard of it.” Said Lianne. “My father told me it was a first strike weapon that a new Russian President killed off. Like a fast boat most of the time, but it can skim the waves at close to the speed of sound. I’m amazed you still have one.”

“Your father is amazingly well informed. Designed to beat the radar that looks for incoming missiles. Lighter than the original concept, much lighter. It has efficient hydrogen motors that can get it halfway across the world without refuelling. Stealth technology, it will just look like a seagull flying over the ocean on marine radar. It can get right up to an enemy’s coast and fire sixteen missiles, all with multiple warheads. Then Premier Sidorov arrived and he loved the loved the western democracies, so everyone had to love the west again. Ekranoplan was dropped and everyone denied it had ever been a first strike weapon. I believe this is the last of three prototypes.”

“Do you have the missiles too ?” Asked Barwood.

“No, I’d need to be a general at least to be trusted with those and even then, I’d never be given the arming codes. Come on though, it has to be worth a truck. We have a machine to split hydrogen from water, so I’ll throw in full tanks of compressed hydrogen.”

Nigel whispered in her ear.

“It could fly over the marshes Lianne.” He muttered. “We could probably land it on a waterway close to the Priozersk base. It has to be worth a truck, has to be.”

Barwood looked keen, even it didn’t come complete with megatons of thermonuclear lethality. It had to be worth a truck, everyone seemed to think, and she tended to agree with them. Her dad would agree, she was sure of that. Even if it was no use to them at all, the Ekranoplan was the ultimate weird device. JV would love it with all his heart.

“Come on Lianne, agree to the trade.” Said Ivan. “Your truck for the Ekranoplan Vengeance, the recordings you wanted and full tanks of fuel for your remaining truck and the APC. I’ll even throw in a few bottles of vodka. The proper stuff from before from before the war, not home distilled.”

There was only thing bothering her, the deal was too good.

“Why are you so keen on getting rid of this boat, aircraft.....Whatever the hell it is ? Does it actually work ?”

It looked like a huge boat with missile tubes attached to it, lots of missile tubes. Powered by huge hydrogen motors that could propel it over the ocean at close to the speed of sound. Just two short

stubby wings, the shape of the hull gave it lift once it rose out of the water. Her dad had once mentioned rumours that it could actually break the sound barrier.

"Of course it works, and we do routine maintenance on it." Said Ivan. "You're looking at the pride of the Russian fleet. I could be executed for giving it to you, but we need a decent truck. We don't need a first strike weapon, but we do need a truck that isn't breaking down all the time. We already have about six of those."

There was something about the way he said it. Ivan was telling her the truth. He wanted a modern hydrogen powered truck, complete with comms. He even had his own water splitter to give as much hydrogen as he needed. She was also sure he didn't want to lose any men in a fight for it.

"Does it have any weapons?" She asked.

"A few ground to air missiles and traditional fast firing cannons fore and aft."

Lianne put out her hand and Ivan looked very pleased to shake it.

"You're now the proud owner of an Ekranoplan." Said Ivan.

"Before we go colonel." Said Lianne. "I need to give you a few pills and explain why your people need to take them regularly."

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The night was a bit too cold for drinking lemonade on the porch, but they were doing it anyway. The kids were asleep, or at least pretending to be and Jill was fast asleep in a chair in the lounge. Mateo Lopez made an observation on life.

"There is nothing quite like sitting out on the porch." He said.

"No disagreement from me." Said Helen. "Oh look, a shooting star.....It's a big one."

"Might be space debris.....Theirs perhaps, or maybe ours."

"Or maybe just a harmless meteorite."

Mateo sipped at the lemonade which was always a bit too sweet, though he always said it was perfect.

"We haven't seen the aliens for ages, do you think they've gone?" Asked Helen.

"No, they're bound to be back. The people on Jersey probably thought they'd gone away and look what happened to them."

"Are we going to stay here then? Jill mentioned Fifth West were building something, some way of escaping."

"We don't know where they are Helen....Besides, we seem safe enough here, for now."

"For now dear.....For now. We could go to the Combe Martin base, there might be some information there. You could take Jill with you; she knows the place."

"No, we'll leave Jill to look after the kids." Said Mateo. "We'll both go to Combe Martin. It isn't far, we shouldn't be away for long."

"You trust Jill that much?"

"Yes, I do."

"When I think about.....So do I." Said Helen.

"We don't have to leave here of course."

"No, of course not....But if we do find news about somewhere better....."

"Can't hurt to at least consider it." Said Mateo.

He filled up their lemonade glasses, just as another bright shooting star passed over. It looked very bright, with lots of different colours. Probably just a space rock burning up.

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