

Ishmael II : Pandora

Chapter 25 – We’re Leaving

“Ishmael liked the Lake District, though even its quiet valleys weren’t free of reminders that the planet was involved in a war. The British army had been involved in heavy fighting near Bassenthwaite, though no one seemed to remember why.”



She’d had some fairly nasty fights with her mum in the past, most of them about Ishmael. Not all of them though, Judy Gray had been known to hold some fairly unpleasant opinions. For a woman who wrote articles mainly for women’s magazines, Dora’s mum seemed surprisingly low on empathy and compassion.

“We’ll need to carry this on later Judy, I have a meeting in five minutes.” Said Francine.

They do say there’s no such thing as a coincidence, yet to be walking down the same corridor as her mum, at an hour when most were still to get out of bed. It wasn’t even a main corridor, more of a grubby cut through you had to know about. Francine smiled a welcome, but her mum didn’t.

“Another early bird.” Said Francine.

“We’re releasing Metro today.” Said Dora. “There are a surprising number of loose ends to tie up, before we let him go.”

“I saw the report, be careful Dora.” Said Francine.

Her mum hadn’t said a word and didn’t look likely to. That had driven Dora crazy when she’d been younger, really crazy. A mixture of insecurity and guilt, caused by the assumption that in some way or other, the fight had been her fault. If nothing else, the horrors of war had toughened Dora and working for Fifth West had done a lot for her feelings of self-worth. She was certainly a much tougher person, than the medical student who’d left home one morning, to be diverted by the alien invasion, for years.

“I’ll give you a full blow by blow later.” She said to Francine.

Francine would notice the bad vibe, though she’d never mention it. They vanished down the corridor, her mum still trying to pester Francine about something she didn’t want to talk about.

“I said I have a meeting Judy.....Leave a note with my PA and I will consider it.”

With that, they turned a corner and all Dora could hear was a hint of voices heading off towards the admin offices. While at college Dora had read a book by a respected psychologist, in which they’d said it was impossible for any woman to have a healthy relationship with her mother. Not a completely bullshit theory, though probably too much of a generalisation. For Dora it came down to once needing her mum, not matter what. Up until a certain age it had been impossible to be financially capable of renting a flat and eating. Any argument with her mum then had ended with the infamous, ‘while you live under this roof’ card. Judy Gray had been a master player of that card, Dora still had emotional scars from those days.

“She can be a bitch; But I don’t need her anymore.” She muttered.

Except she knew that was nonsense. It had to be a gender thing; she’d known guys who’d happily broken away from parents who’d made their life a misery. One phone call to say adiós muchachos and that was it, forever. Women weren’t like that, or at least the ones she knew weren’t. There seemed to be an invisible umbilical cord linking girl children to their mums, and it could never be cut.

"It will have to be sorted out, one way or the other." She mumbled.

Dora had a little of her mum inside her, even if she'd have fought anyone who'd said it. There was the Judy stubbornness and the Judy need to always be right. Watered down from the original, but there none the less. She couldn't let the fight with her mum end in a glaring session, a kind of stalemate. When the opportunity arose, she was going to have it out with her mum, once and for all.

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"We're leaving."

Lianne Verga hadn't thought two such simple words could turn her world upside down. She'd taken Nigel up for a fifty-thousand-foot-high run in Nostromo and her bird had flown beautifully. Probably wrong of her to claim all the credit, her father and the original team in Russia, had put together the design. The way it handled, the balance, the ease with which it climbed rapidly to eye watering heights. All that had been in the design by her dad and Dimitri Minasyan. They had never put enough time into the project, so their shuttle had never launched. Even they hadn't designed all of it, there were quite a few alien crossovers, based on crashed spacecraft recovered all over the world. She'd got her to fly though, no one else had done that. Now she was ready to go into orbit, though she'd decided to do it alone. A little tinkering...Alright a lot of tinkering, but she remembered that drag race cars were completely rebuilt after every run. Then, as she was looking at a panel full of green lights and hoping the weather would hold, her dad was there.

"We're leaving, the message arrived with last night's data burst." He told her. "They're ahead of schedule and as it might take us a while to get to Norway....They recommend that we leave here almost immediately."

"But.....My Nostromo is ready to go up into space."

"I'm taking immediately to mean seven days Lianne. You've time to do your trip outside the atmosphere."

"What then?" She asked.

She could see her dad looking a little confused.

"To Nostromo I mean, I'd like to take her to Norway."

"We talked this over, there was an agreement." Said JV. "Once we get to the Norwegian coast, my Ekranoplan will be destroyed. It can't be allowed to fall into the hands of one of the local militias. Bandits really, the stories keep coming in about what they're doing. Similarly, Nostromo must be destroyed. You've made her dangerous with those weapons. I'm immensely proud of you, but Nostromo has to be destroyed before we leave."

Her head began to fill with reasons Nostromo might be useful once they reached Norway. She knew JV, he'd accept a reasonable idea, if it was a way of avoiding a huge row with her. When the idea came into her mind, it went beyond just being reasonable, it was a damned good idea.

"We still have no way to deal with their high-altitude bombers." She said. "If they attack the Norwegian base, all the work on the shuttles will have been for nothing. Nostromo can climb fast and get up as high as their bombers. If they attack us, Nostromo can give the aliens a nasty surprise." Her father was smiling at her. He knew she was trying to manipulate him, but he'd also realise that families were often held together by a little manipulation.

"Alright, that is actually a solid and sensible plan." He said. "You'll need to practise vertical take off and landing, the Norwegian base is at the top of a mountain."

"Thanks.....My bird will be useful, you'll see."

"Only a brief stay of execution Lianne. Once we're ready to leave Earth, Nostromo can't be simply left behind, she will need to be destroyed."

"I know dad, I know."

Ishmael liked the Lake District, though even its quiet valleys weren't free of reminders that the planet was involved in a war. The British army had been involved in heavy fighting near Bassenthwaite, though no one seemed to remember why. The burned-out truck by the side of the road contained the remains of a driver, who no one had bothered to give a proper burial. All in all though, when he thought about it, the Lakes were still pretty much the same since Alfred Wainwright had put together his maps and walks.

There was a certain calm, even after their helicopters had landed by the side of the A591. Three of the best Fifth West helicopters and around forty of their toughest fighters, all to protect Metro. Not that they were expecting to be attacked by Metro's people, feral humans and bandit groups were the main threat.

"Not a hint of any enemies in the area as we came in." Said the copter pilot.

"Let the guards spread out, then open the rear doors." Said Dora.

They were in a scavenger helicopter, that had the advantage of rear cargo doors and a ramp. It would all be done by their converted Bio-Bots. No human would be directly involved in getting Metro and his life support spheres, safely out of the copter. The converted creatures did the job perfectly because nothing disturbed their focus.

"You can trust him; our elite have a code of behaviour." Horace had told them. "Metro is a direct descendant of the great emperor, the one who united our planet. If he gives his word, it will be kept."

The alien structure near Bassenthwaite was the perfect place to leave Metro. Small, Ish could only sense three aliens in the entire structure. Off the beaten track, an area probably not looked at too closely by the alien satellites that controlled high level bombing. The helicopter pilots had particularly liked the cover of the hillsides as they'd flown up from the south.

"Alright, let's reunite our guest with his own kind." Said Ish.

No talking to Metro, though they'd been through it all with him several times. He was going to be left close to the alien structure, but wouldn't shout for help until their helicopters had time to get clear of the area. Ish trusted Metro and it had nothing to do with any code of chivalry the alien elite might live by. It was in everyone's interest to make sure the human evacuation of Earth went smoothly.

"Those things are amazing." Said a guard.

"Yes, we're very proud of them." Said Dora.

The guard meant the small army of Bio-Bots, who were steering Metro down the ramp. Metro was on a trolley with balloon tyres, with luck the rough ground wouldn't be an issue. The converted alien creatures could even deal with small trees that might get in the way. They were a miracle, that wouldn't exist if they hadn't been forced by circumstances, to dissect the alien constructions. So much had been learned during the war, so much of it morally dubious. They could probably convert the flora and fauna of a new world. They could probably alter the DNA of humans, to make their survival on that new world more certain. Oh, that would open up a whole can of worms. There would be the whole mankind being made in the image of God, thing to deal with. Not that mankind would look like it did now in a few millennia, with or without them tinkering with human DNA.

"If there is a God.....It's our DNA." He muttered.

"Sorry, did you say something?" Asked Dora.

"Just thinking that if anything could be said to be controlling the future of humanity, it's our DNA."

"I'm glad we're not going on the shuttles." Said Dora. "There will be so many morally iffy questions to be dealt with. I think we've dealt with enough of those."

"Yes, let JV and Andy deal with those." He said.

"And Francine."

"Oh yes, of course....Francine will keep them both under control." He said.

Ish was still able to walk, though a long flight in a helicopter wasn't his idea of a fun day out. Every bit of turbulence added a little to the constant pain in his hip. He winced and leant back against the copter's open rear door.

"Are you alright ?" Asked Dora.

"No to be honest, though considering a few people predicted I'd be in a wheelchair by now.....I didn't sleep well last night."

"He's there.....I'll recall our creatures." Said Dora.

They were leaving Metro on the trolley; it would make it easier for his own people to get him into the alien structure. Ish felt for Metro's mind and did a kind of link he couldn't really explain to anyone. It was like neighbours nodding to each other in the street. Ish felt a little warmth and hoped Metro felt it too.

"I wish we'd met them under different circumstances." He said.

"Yes, though they were unlikely to have come all this way just to say howdy."

"Or bring over a welcome to the neighbourhood cake." He said

That made Ish laugh and he needed to laugh. The pain in his hip kept him awake, so that he couldn't sleep properly. Not sleeping caused dark thoughts, though Dora could always snap him out of those.

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Doug Barrett had expected to be welcomed as a fellow scavenger. After all, he had been a dealer in contraband for a large part of his adult life. Alas, there didn't seem to be much of a call for pirates on dry land, or so the lady in campus admin had told him. His choice of career was outside of his control and based on his own assessment of any transferable skills he might have. Rather unsurprisingly, going by what he'd been told, he'd be chosen for shuttle assembly duties.

"I think there's been some kind of mistake."

He'd said to the first senior person he'd seen, on his first morning in shuttle assembly. It seemed such comments were common and invariably ignored. If he expected to eat, he was expected to contribute to the campus. In his case, that meant being a semi-skilled electrical assembler. Semi-skilled ? He'd mentioned rebuilding marine diesel engines, so they'd put him through an aptitude test. No one had told him if he'd passed the test, but he assumed he had. He'd seen Ela once, though she seemed even further down the food chain than him. There was even a poster on the wall, if anyone felt like asking what the hell it was all about.

'Want a seat on a shuttle to a new world ? Work in shuttle assembly for a guaranteed place.'

The sign wasn't the total truth, such signs rarely were the entire truth. There was a small but growing list of those rejected for medical reasons. Not happy people, most had been shifted to working on the farms. No doubt someone senior had decided having a grudge on a farm, was less potentially catastrophic than a moody in shuttle assembly. On the whole though, Doug's fellow conscripts in the assembly hangars, were a fairly happy gang.

"Doug.....You'll be helping Jayne and Ralph install a fusion drive." Said his manager. "Do you think you're ready ?"

"Yes, of course.....Always ready for a challenge."

Despite all having the same design designation, not all the huge shuttles were the same. Some were truly huge, able to carry large numbers of people, and some of the equipment needed for a new world. Not that any of the shuttles were small, even the smallest could carry two hundred refugees from planet Earth.

“Wow, they’ve given us a big one today.” Said Jayne.

The largest shuttles were underneath the areas of hangar ceilings designed to open and they’d been given one of the biggest to work on. Once the really large birds had taken flight, the smaller shuttles could be moved about on rails. It all looked and sounded a bit low tech, but he’d been told the entire fleet could be launched in a single afternoon.

“Once launched, the onboard AI will form the fleet into a formation. After that all there is for us to do is go to sleep on our couches and wait for the fleet to reach a habitable planet.”

Andy Korenberg had told them all at one of the regular meetings. The launch had to work perfectly first time. The explosive charges and other devices used to open up the hangars to the outside world, would leave the hangars exposed to the elements. There was no going back after that.

“This is my first drive install, be gentle with me.” Said Doug.

“Just watch Jayne, she can do it in her sleep.” Said Ralph.

Were they an item, as the kids tended to say ? There was a lot of eye contact and flirting, but Doug wasn’t good at reading the signals, he never had been. Not that it mattered of course. All that mattered was fitting several tons of fusion drive, into a shuttle the size of a super tanker. Jayne was tall, thin and looked to be about thirty. She was currently squinting at him, as though he was a bug she’d just found in her soup.

“I was told your aptitude test was in the top five percent Doug.” She said. “You get to drive the MKIII loader.”

“This one is the MKV.” Said Ralph.

“Whatever.....We need the drive on the other side of the hangar, over this side of the hangar.”

Ralph was also tall, thin and looked to be about thirty. Doug liked his colleagues, mostly. There was a strange put-on mixture of cynicism and indifference, but deep down.....He wasn’t sure, but the manager seemed to respect their skills.

“Ok, one MKV loader and drive coming up.” Said Doug.

He hadn’t been impressed at first, there seemed to be a lot of people pulling and shoving heavy objects. Once he’d finished a few electrical installs, they’d let him loose on bigger things. Yes, a lot of strong backs were needed where once machines would have done the jobs. But, as his manager had told him, several times.

“We make do with what we have.....There is a war going on, if you haven’t noticed.”

Once he was used to the system, Doug understood that it all worked amazingly well. Once the sweaty and tired people had put the machinery in the right place, the technology took over. Just about all the alignment and testing was done by the campus AI, or the onboard AI of the shuttle. Doug had seen one guy using a huge rubber mallet on a drive cover, but that was rare. And, as he was told by one of the inspection team.

“By the time everything is bolted and welded into place, it’s not going anywhere.”

The drive was there, the drive construction team had even left the crates next to a MKV Power Loader. Four small crates and one fuck off sized monster of a crate. That was the one likely to hurt someone if it wasn’t moved properly.

“Top five in the aptitude test huh.” He muttered. “It would have been nice if someone had told me.”

It was all so different to working on marine engines, but also the same in some ways. All people wanted was something that worked reliably. How engineers got from a pile of bits to a working engine.....Didn't really interest most people. Doug gave the loader a pat on the bit that looked most like a head.

"Be nice, I know you've done this many more times than I have." He said.

Loaders were really huge and powerful robot devices. Smart some of them and getting smarter all the time. Probably nonsense, but the hangar zeitgeist was that they were so smart, they resented working for people, or at least rude people. There were stories about loaders bumping people into corridor walls, or dropping things on their feet. Nothing really dangerous, but still, Doug didn't feel silly being polite to a MKV loader. There were a few people about and none of them were looking at him as though he was crazy.

"Alright.....Let's mark the crates on your system."

Like most complex and potentially dangerous technology, designers had moved away from voice commands. When a difficult to understand accent might mean a disaster, robotics had moved back to the certainty of screens and keyboards. The MKV could be told to follow, or do simple tasks by voice, but everything else, required the Pad lying on top of a crate. Logging in was via pushing his thumb against the top of the screen and he had control of what might well be, the smartest and strongest robot in the world. If anything got crushed or broken, the central computer now knew who to blame. He gently touched each crate with the Pad and like magic, they appeared as drawings on the Pad. It was possible to micro manage the MKV, but Doug didn't even believe in micro managing people, let alone a machine probably cleverer than half the humans on campus.

"You can decide what to take first." He muttered.

He drew a ring around all the crates and put his finger on the you decide box, which really said, AI activated. The MKV kind of stood up, though the hydraulic legs on wheels looked nothing like human legs. Instead of going straight for the crates, the MKV headed towards him.

"Hey....What can I do for you buddy ?" Said Doug.

The MKV didn't have hands, though it did have a small multiple use device holder, just the right size to use tools designed for human hands. It patted Doug on the head twice with the device holder.

"Follow me." It said.

Yep, with every new design the damned things seemed to gain more of an attitude.

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Vicky's people had begun crossing to England by boats of one kind or another, though all along she'd intended to use the channel tunnel. Both entrances had been bombed and blocked early in the invasion, but the damage had been repairable. Like the people who'd built huge canals and train tunnels in the days before machines took over the job, Vicky had a huge number of willing labourers. Her children's, children's descendants were clever, far more clever than the average human who'd wielded a shovel and a pick. If any problems occurred while digging out and repairing the tunnel, they could work out a solution. The channel tunnel had been started from the French side at the time of Napoleon, yet not finished until the nineteen nineties. Vicky's people had repaired and reopened it less than three months after starting the job. Of course, she'd insisted on leading her people through the close to thirty-mile-long tunnel.

"I feel a speech is called for, but no obvious words come to mind." She said to Einer, her daughter and first-born child.

Of the first seven children born on Lunar, six still lived, which was both surprising and pleasing.

They'd fought so hard and achieved so much, yet by some miracle only Siebte had died on the long

journey across the globe. Vicky had been born in England, before her DNA had been compromised, before being mutated and augmented. When she dreamt though, she dreamt of herself as a human female. In a very real sense, the journey across the globe, was a journey home.

"Hmmm maybe a few words about following in the footsteps of Julius Caesar." Said Einer.

"Ahh, are you teasing me.....It has come to something when my first born teases me."

"Only a little Vicky, only a little."

Vicky began to descend into the tunnel, just a gently gradient. There were thousands of her kind behind her. Like the mice that were part of her DNA, they could breed at an astonishing rate if their numbers were reduced in battle. Similarly, they often stopped breeding at all, if their numbers were in danger of outstripping their food supply. It was wonderful, but it was all part of their DNA and they had no control over it. It concerned her that her descendants might one day be so numerous, that they'd need to hunt and kill humans. It was a worry, but there were more immediate concerns. One of their alien hostages had died the night before, probably by suicide. The problem was that they didn't know alien physiology well enough to understand how an unarmed alien had managed to end her own life.

"I know." Said Vicky. "How about..... I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king....etc."

"You're hardly weak and feeble Vicky."

"Yes, you might be right. I'm determined to make a speech of some kind as we arrive in England.

Something based on Napoleon maybe, he had a way with words."

"Or you could say something original."

"You're teasing me again."

"Only a little Vicky, only a little."

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There seemed a lot going on in the Midlands and none of it pleasant. They kept getting pushed west to avoid trouble, mainly from human gangs. The war brought out the best in some, but sadly it brought out the worst in others. They'd found a small public park called Rectory Wood, a tiny oasis of green trees and a small pond. Even the sign hadn't been vandalised. Helen Lopez was sat on their cart, observing the small town through binoculars looted from the Combe Martin base of the now defunct Kingdom.

"It looks quiet enough, and we do need supplies." She said.

"Where are we?" Asked Tina.

"Shropshire honey, a place called Church Stretton. There's an army supply dump to the north of the town." Said Mateo Lopez.

"Every place looks alright." Said Jill. "Until it isn't."

"I'd rather not stop.....Though remember that the supply bases on the map have kept us well fed."

Said Mateo. "The supply dump might even be a safe place to spend the night."

They were all keen really, every stop for supplies seemed to bring a surprise. Tinned food in one place, that was only a few months out of date. A Fifth West supply depot still had hot water from a boiler with a power pack, that by some miracle still worked. It was like pulling the arm of a slot machine, with every new supply depot. It was the chance of a nice reward, that made the risk of entering a new town worthwhile. They all stood there, until Jill moved.

"This place might have a shower." Said Jill.

"Or a games room." Said Tom.

An army base had a room with a couple of snooker tables, though they'd needed to clear some rubble to make one usable. It was that slot machine effect though; Tom was always hoping they'd find another games room.

"Wow, this town is beautiful." Said Mateo.

"We need to keep heading north, according to the map." Said Helen.

There was a note on the map, saying Church Stretton had been big with Victorians wanting a vacation, they'd called it Little Switzerland. Helen thought the town must have been gorgeous before the war, but Little Switzerland? The Victorians probably didn't get abroad that often.

"I can see a sign for the golf club, we're going the right way." She said.

"Stop!" Yelled Tina, as she pointed.

Between them and the Shrewsbury Road, the three men were all armed. There was a look about their clothing, not a uniform, but all looking the same. Their average on people being trouble was about seventy percent being harmless wanderers, like themselves. Twenty percent had tried to get food and supplies off them by various means, including violence. The final ten percent were the bad ones, the feral humans and those who were just plain crazy. The three men began to raise their weapons and Helen knew they were bad ones; she just knew it.

"Get down.....Get behind the cart." She yelled.

It was probably how the men survived, instantly firing on anyone they met. The cart and horse being led by Jill, was an obvious sign that they had things worth taking. Luckily Helen had yet to meet a feral or crazy who could shoot straight. The first few bullets went wild, which gave Mateo and her a chance to fire back.

"They're using hunting rifles, single shot." Yelled Mateo. "Keep them under cover with the shotgun." Helen might have done it differently, but Mateo knew what he was doing, and she could see his plan. They'd been through so many dangerous situations, that she could almost work out what Mateo was going to do, without them exchanging a word.

"Stop it Tom, keep behind the cart." Said Tina.

Tina would keep Tom safe, Helen had to focus her mind on the men. They'd got behind a pile of logs at the edge of the golf course. She fired the shotgun half a dozen times, sending up a huge amount of dust and debris from the log pile. One put his head out to fire back and it looked like Mateo hit him with a shot from the heavy hunting rifle he was getting better with. Helen couldn't be sure, but it looked like the enemy were down a guy. A period of chaos followed, with everyone firing at everyone else. Jill was firing too, though by her own admission, she wasn't likely to hit much. Right through all the noise, Helen could hear Tina sobbing. Damn the girl, of all the times to have a tantrum

"Give us half the food in your cart." Yelled one of the men. "We won't bother you then."

"Until another scumbag like you wants the other half." Helen shouted.

The chaos began again, where anyone might get hit by a stray bullet, or a ricochet. Helen kept firing the shotgun, mainly just to stop the men behind the logs from getting a shot at them. One of her shots caused a flash of blood and a scream. Good luck really, or bad luck for the man who jumped up. She might have blinded him, he showed no worry about being out in the open, while he held his face. It seemed a mercy when Mateo finished him off.

"I'm going.....You won't get any more trouble from me."

The third guy ran as fast as he could, vanishing among the trees near the main Shrewsbury Road. Helen fired once, deliberately aiming wide. Hopefully it would convince him that keeping well away from them and their cart, would be good for his health.

"Is everyone alright?" Shouted Mateo.

There had been Tina sobbing and now she had a moment to think about it, Tina never sobbed about a fight with her brother and she'd outgrown tantrums. Tom, why hadn't Tom been calling out to her, he always found her if he was scared.

"Tom, who is with Tom?" She asked.

"I have him here and Tina. They're both fine." Said Jill.

Helen had wanted to make sure the two dead men were really dead, with no chance of them still being a threat. There was something though, Tom was still very quiet and Tina continued to sob.

"Poor Geronimo." Said Tina.

The horses had names, though that hadn't stopped Tina from giving them new names every few days. She'd started calling Sugar, Geronimo, despite her being a female horse. Bella looked fine, but Sugar was sweating and looking very stressed.

"Are you alright girl?"

Helen could feel Sugar trembling as she stroked her neck. The blood she noticed, when she looked down. A bullet hole behind Sugar's front leg, it was amazing the large heavy horse was still on her feet.

"Will she be alright?" Asked Tina.

"No, honey, she won't." Said Helen.

There was a horse in need of help, in the only way any of them were capable of helping poor Sugar. The bullet would have gone in deep, she doubted if a fully trained vet could have saved their horse.

"What do you mean?" Asked Tina.

"Come with me, your mum needs a little privacy." Said Jill.

More questions from the kids, though they did follow Jill, to wherever it was she was taking them. It would be easier to remove the straps that attached Sugar to the cart, far easier now than later.

Helen was sobbing when Mateo said he was going to make sure the two dead men, were genuinely dead.

"Leave me your rifle." She said. "The shotgun will get the job done, but the rifle will make a cleaner job of it."

Once Sugar was untied from the cart, Helen hugged her gently and put her face up against her horse's nose.

"I'm so sorry Sugar."

As she pulled back, she saw it in the horse's eyes. She knew that horses aren't the brightest creatures in the world, but she saw understanding in Sugar's eyes. The horse that had helped pull their cart half the length of England, knew the day wasn't going to end well for her. Helen backed off a few paces and aimed the rifle a little behind Sugar's eye.

"Keep still girl, keep still." Said Helen.

Helen fired and to her immense relief, Sugar instantly fell to the ground. The kids would hate her for a while, but there had been no alternative. Everyone was going to have to work harder now of course, with just Bella to help pull the cart.

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It was Matt Newman's fault really. If he hadn't wanted the job, he shouldn't have told Francine how essential it was. He'd never intended to pitch himself for the position, but it had probably looked that way.

“You can’t rely on just having thick stone walls and solid doors Francine. We saw them on our way here, the undesirables for want of a better word. They’re organising and the way campus security is, they can simply walk in and knock on the door.”

He’d gone on to mention the lack of protection for the outside workers and quite quickly, he found himself the commander of a new campus security team. Matt was allocated a few tough Fifth West fighters, though most if his new fighting force had been injured in some way. A lot of limps, and people who had to take their time getting up out of a chair. Not exactly the A team, but Matt had worked with far worse. They all seemed keen and that was a huge part of doing the job right.

“We used to have problems with Mary and her group.” Said Spud. “In the end it was easier to let them have a little food, as long as they didn’t break down fences. Most of the time, they’re now quite good neighbours.”

“She’s worth saying hello to.” Said Reedy. “The kids in her family see everything that goes on and then they tell Mary.”

Matt had heard local interpreters tell him much the same thing, in at least half a dozen war zones across the globe. It didn’t unduly surprise him to be having the same conversation in North Yorkshire. He even knew what Mary was likely to say to him.

“You two stay with the vehicle.” He said.

He had four soldiers with him, though Spud and Reedy had made themselves his self-appointed personal guards. He was surprised they hadn’t started following him into the bathroom. The other two could stay with their APC, to stop it getting vandalised. Kids had a habit of clambering over their vehicles, sometimes damaging the antenna. That was bad, really bad, it was their only way to ask for backup.

“Alright, let’s go and say hello to Mary.” Said Matt.

Spud had been a scavenger, until everyone realised he had a jinxed left arm. Not a genuine medical term, but Spud had been wounded in the same spot, on the same arm, five times. Besides being jinxed, he’d lost a lot of dexterity in that arm, which was bad news for a scavenger. Matt liked the guy, though he did tend to treat every outing in the APC as a special ops mission. He’d get over it eventually, everyone did, even special ops soldiers.

“Turnips are her thing.” Said Reedy. “Her family seems to live on nothing but turnips.”

Reedy was called Reedy, because her second name was Reed, nothing more complicated than that. Spud had some local knowledge, but Reedy was the real expert. Mary had been invited to bring her group inside the campus, but they were happy where they were. Scientists and Fifth West seemed to scare a few groups who were relatively harmless, but preferred to remain outside, surviving on whatever food they could pilfer. There were days when he wondered if they were the sane ones. Mary received visitors in an old tent on rainy days, but outside when it was dry. It was a good day, Mary was sat outside on an old crate, next to a pile of turnips. She had to say it, he wasn’t going to be happy if she didn’t say it.

“Hello Mary, I’m Matt.....I’m the new guy in charge of campus security.”

“I didn’t do anything.” Said Mary.

There it was, he’d heard that phrase in so many places. It seemed to be a global reaction to the cops turning up unexpectedly, or soldiers. Matt had heard it so often; he now recognised the words in several languages.

“I’m sure you haven’t. I’m just here to say hello and to see if you’ve noticed anything strange going on in the area?”

“Stephen was bitten.” Said a young girl.

“Just one of the green lizards, he should have been more careful.” Said Mary.

“This green lizard moves to different trees.” Said the girl.

Stephen looked to be about fourteen or so, the girl about the same age. The boy duly rolled up his sleeve to show a badly infected wound, that looked like a bite.

“That needs looking at.” Said Matt.

“We can do it here.” Added Reedy. “It won’t hurt and you don’t have to go inside.”

Mary was surrounded by people and all of them seemed happy for Reedy to spray the wound with an antibiotic cleaner and apply a dressing that would help the wound heal. Stephen winced a bit, but Reedy had probably saved the boy’s arm.

“If the creature moves around, it could be dangerous.” Said Matt. “We could take care if it, if that’s alright ?”

Mary didn’t own the land, Matt doubted if Fifth West did either. The farm had probably been owned by someone who was long gone. Asking Mary’s permission was just being polite. Mary nodded at him.

Just the girl went with them into the small wood at the edge of two fields. A boggy area with quite a few large rocks, farmers tend to find it easier to let such places return to nature. They found the small green hanging onto the side of a large oak tree.

“Stay behind me.” He told the girl.

Matt fired at the small green and when it was on the ground, Spud fired at it twice. It was still sparking; the damned things had been known to spark for days. It wasn’t going to move around biting kids anymore.

“Don’t touch it, but it won’t hurt anyone now.” Said Reedy.

“Thank you.” Said the girl.

That was it, that was what Matt thought of as job well done. Stephen was likely to still have a working arm and he’d helped Mary and her group of turnip rustlers.

“Let us know if you see anything else that needs sorting out.” Said Matt.

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