



Welcome Home

by **Pauline Walker**

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Kiki's intake of detainees was welcomed by a dour-faced CWHP Commander, guards and dogs. The compound gates were slammed shut and the Commander threw a piece of meat at the gates. It stuck to the railings, sizzled and fell. A German Shepherd was let off its leash and pounced on the charred meat, swinging it from its jaws before devouring it. A trembling virus spread through the detainees and a shadow passed over them. Hordes of drones blocked out the sun. They mimicked the murmuration of starlings, undulating and creating fantastic shapes, separating into swirling patterns before coalescing into a dark mass. Their sound was like crashing waves as they dipped and spiralled across the ocean blue sky. A cluster of drones split away from the multitude and dived at the detainees, whistling, chirping and croaking, before zooming upwards to re-join the surging mass. Again and again, clusters dived at the detainees who cowered. After a final swirl, the drones formed a smiling image of President Dubock. Guards divided the terrified detainees and took them to the accommodation: pregnant women and their families were housed in caravans, the rest in dormitories. Kiki, Ruun and Suki were left behind with the Commander. Guards kicked the back of their legs and they fell on their knees.

Air billowed around them. A huge silent drone hovered overhead. Scalps prickled and they blinked incessantly and gulped in air as it swooped low. It began to whine, and they shrank away and clamped their hands over their ears, but the awful sound was already inside their heads, hurting. The Commander lifted his hands and the whining stopped.

‘On behalf of President Dubock, welcome to your new home.’

Suki reached for Kiki’s hand. A guard slapped it away, another pointed a gun at Ruun, who had jumped up. Ruun held up his hands and lowered himself down.

‘Even though your husband was a traitor to his people, you deprived the President of his son. You were the one driving. You killed Aleksander Dubock. You will never leave here.’

Kiki sank as if she’d been kicked, gasping. Guards hauled them up, dragged them behind the Commander who marched around the compound, pointing out the twelve-foot perimeter walls with security spikes on top, the ten-storey Command Centre in the middle of the site overlooking ten windowless factories and the guards’ accommodation block. Old warehouses and factories set up like dormitories housed the detainees and beyond them were squares of caravans with loaded washing lines crisscrossed between them. The canteen was on the opposite side of the road from the rec yard which was enclosed within metal fencing. The Commander praised the all-seeing and armed drones, calling the largest one The Master, and the smaller ones which had dived at the detainees, Children. The Master had 8 copter wings and a wingspan of seven meters. The Children, small enough to put in a pocket, glided beneath The Master.

The Smyths were pushed inside the Command Centre for face scans, finger and palm printing, and blood draws. Images of President Dubock were projected on every wall. The guards took them to a caravan, shadowed by The Master and a group of buzzing Children. Caravan doors had been left open for the scant breeze, but the air was as stifling inside as outside. That first night Kiki drowned in tears and sweat. For weeks after, debilitated with disbelief and numbness, Kiki stopped talking to her baby until Raina, who lived in the caravan opposite, asked her how far along she was. Kiki touched her stomach, fingers slowly fanning out over a hopeless future.