

Bradford II – Badlands

Chapter 14 - Escape

'Escape;

Synonyms; getaway, breakout, bolt for freedom, running away, flight, bolting, absconding, decamping, fleeing, flit, disappearance, vanishing act.'

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Hector Pérez wasn't too bad at handling the heat as they descended the stairs. It was the humidity that made him breathe harder than usual. As they entered Sub Level 4, there was a smell that hadn't been there before. It was an odour that reminded him of the large communal toilets in the City East prison.

"Ewww, it stinks down here." Said Maggie.

"Stay together and fire at anything that moves." Said Roxy.

The elevator was close to the stairs, or what was left of it. The impact of the falling elevator had blown the doors off and cracked the concrete floor in several places. Hector looked through the doors, seeing only darkness. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he could see the remains of the elevator at the bottom of a pit.

"Jim !" He shouted. "We're here Jim."

No answer, he hadn't really expected one. Roxy joined him and they both peered at the ruined elevator about ten feet below them.

"Jim, it's Roxy ! Shout out if you can hear me."

Maggie lit an oil lamp without being asked, which gave them enough light to see the destruction in the pit. A deliberate pit to break the fall of a falling elevator, they could see pieces of the rubber material which had been used to fill the pit.

"Jim !" Yelled Roxy.

There was a scuffling sound behind them, which made everyone jump. Hector spun, his assault rifle up and ready to fire. Nothing was there. They all heard the growling in the distance though, almost as if something was defying them to go any further.

"Damn, we need to hunt them down." Said Hector. "Jim is obviously dead, we should say a few words over where his body lies and move on."

"There is a chance Hector." Said Roxy. "If it was you down there, you'd want someone to make sure."

"There was stuff to cushion the fall." Said Chip.

"Cushion it !" Snapped Hector. "Have you seen what's down there ? The elevator is broken into tiny piece, shattered."

It was madness to risk going down there, but Roxy was right of course. If it had been him down there, he'd have wanted someone to at least make sure he was dead.

"I'm going down there." Said Roxy. "Just keep an eye open for those...Creatures."

"I'll help you....Mags, Chip....Keep your eyes open and don't let one of those things bite my backside." Said Hector.

"We won't." Said Maggie.

He had to get right down on the ground to hold Roxy's hands and lower her down, until her feet just touched a solid looking piece of debris. Battery lights only existed in San Pablo and even there, they

were ridiculously expensive. He passed the oil lamp down to Roxy's outstretched hand, wishing it gave off a better light.

"No sightseeing Roxy." He called. "Make sure he's dead and get out of there."

"Just be ready to pull me out."

He heard her scuffling about and tutting, but she was blocking his view completely. His attention was taken away from her by the sound of an animal roar and the noise of two rifles being fired.

"I hit it, I know I did." Said Maggie.

Hector turned his attention back to Roxy, who was still pushing bits of debris around.

"I can see Jim."

"Is he dead?"

Stupid question really, of course he was. No one would remain quiet while a rescuer was digging them out of the rubble.

"What was the shooting, are we alright?" Asked Roxy.

"Fine, Maggie shot something. Not sure if it's dead though."

More noises of Roxy moving about, intermixed with a few inventive curses. Hector was certain that Jim wasn't going to miraculously appear out of the pit, when he heard Roxy reciting a section of the Lord's Prayer. Shortly after she was passing up Jim's assault rifle and back pack. It wasn't looting, Roxy had teased Jim about how much ammunition he carried around, ammunition they might well need.

"Me next, grab my hands." She yelled.

So much harder to pull her out than drop her down there. Both of them were breathing hard and covered in dust, by the time Roxy was out of the pit.

"He was dead then?" Asked Maggie.

"Jim must have died fairly instantly." Said Roxy. "I doubt if he suffered at all."

Hector shared the ammunition around, but hung onto the spare rifle. Slowly they walked in the direction of the creature Maggie claimed to have shot. There was a lot of fresh blood, but no body.

"We'll need to be methodical." Said Roxy. "We'll clear out each set of rooms, before moving on."

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Camila Martínez knew escaping from her business for a while would be relatively easy. Her children though, the offspring she loved so dearly..... Were being a pain in the arse.

"You can't leave us with Ariela, she hates me!" Screamed Sofia.

It was the truth of course, though Camila couldn't really blame the temporary housekeeper. Hate might be too strong a word, but there were days when she wanted to give her daughter a beating.

"Yes she hates you, what do you expect? You talk to her as though she came to clean out the drains. I paid her enough to pretend she likes you, so make do with that."

"She's cool.... There's a tattoo of a soldier on her thigh." Said Mateo.

"Oh.... Tell him mom.... He keeps saying that." Yelled Sofia.

Tell him what, not to look at women's thighs? Ariela did seem to wear nothing but very short shorts and Mateo was a boy child. Thinking thighs were cool was part of their reason to exist, especially tattooed thighs. Cruz was picking up the three bags Camila was taking with her. There was already a box full of cutting edge weaponry in the hired APC outside.

"I'm leaving now and I might be away for several weeks." She said. "Ariela will cook breakfast and a meal every night and make sure you have clean clothes. I won't be contactable, so you'll have to get on with Ariela a little better."

"I like her..... She's really cool." Said Mateo.

"I'll go and live with Javi." Shouted her daughter. "His mom likes me, she'll want to look after me. I might not bother coming back."

So tempting to say good, but somewhere deep down, she knew her daughter still loved her. It might be buried very deep, but Camila had faith that it was there somewhere. She hugged her daughter, who pretended to struggle before hugging her back. Mateo was no problem when it came to cuddles, he clambered over her like an excited puppy.

"Be good." Camila told her kids. "Be nice to Ariela and you might get to like her."

"I do, she's got a tattoo....."

"Shut up !" Yelled Sofia.

Camila didn't run for the door, but she did walk quite quickly. No matter what the Badlands had in store for her, it was probably less terrifying than her daughter in a foul mood.

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Chip was glad the lights were still working in Sub Level 4; his night vision wasn't that good. He'd grown up to be tall with strong muscles, but their diet wasn't that good in Pile o' Bones. At least that was what his mother had blamed for his poor night vision and the occasional brain fog. They all had it, though it seemed to be getting worse with each new generation.

"Might be something in the water." His father had once said.

If that was true the filters Hector had promised to install on their water supply might cure it. Chip was drifting a little, his mind could do that when he was feeling stressed. He was brought back to reality by the pain in his ears, as Roxy and Maggie fired their assault rifles inside one of the bunny cage rooms.

"Damn, that thing is huge." Said Roxy. "The biggest so far I think."

Hector was standing guard at the door, so Maggie took over his role as official dead monster kicker. The brute with black fur didn't move as Maggie gave it two hefty kicks.

"They're definitely smart." She said. "It was hiding behind the cage, probably waiting for us to leave."

"Or ambush us." Said Roxy. "Why didn't you fire at it Chip ?"

"You both fired.... That seemed to get it done."

Roxy laughed, though Maggie was giving him an odd look. Sub 4 was all new to him, but he knew the others had already visited the rooms with the bunny cages. That had been the full extent of their exploration though.

"Another set of heavy doors." Said Hector. "That never bodes well."

"At least they're open." Said Roxy.

No signs above the doors, but no flashing lights either. The smell seemed worse past the doors though, the scent of stale shit and unwashed bodies. Again about four out of every six lights were still working which left some areas of shadow.

"Wonderful, more biohazard signs." Said Hector.

The corridor took them to an oval area with a few dust covered seats in the centre. There were rooms all around them, all with biohazard signs on the wall. No posters, but there had been framed pictures on the wall once. Time had worked its dreadful trick, reducing the pictures and their frames to piles of debris on the floor. Chip looked at the one surviving picture.

"It's a picture of a lake, beside some mountains." He said.

"I think it's a waiting room." Said Maggie.

"Come on, let's get it done." Said Roxy. "Hector at the door, while we search each room. A thorough search this time..... Remember the creature hiding behind the cage."

Chip took one look into the first room and decided to be honest.

"Can I guard the door, it's pretty dark in there." He said. "My night vision isn't as good as it could be."

"Oh, you might have said something before now." Said Maggie.

There was something about her tone of voice that stung him. He was smitten of course and really wanted to impress her. It surprised him when Hector came to his rescue.

"He's told us now Mags." He said. "It's diet if you believe the experts. You take the door Chip and stay alert."

"I will Hector, I promise."

The others were inside the room when the howling started. It seemed to come from everywhere, but he was determined not to be distracted. He held his assault rifle up, aiming it in the direction most of the noise was coming from.

"There, in the far corner !" He heard Roxy yell.

They were using single fire now to conserve ammunition. There was still a lot of gunfire coming from the room, though he was determined to ignore it. They were doing their job and he needed to do his.

"Christ ! Another two, near the examination table." Hector was shouting.

The assault rifles had a bark which was hurting all their ears. Chip heard something growling though, before the huge bear like creature ran straight at him. More yelling and gunfire behind him. Chip just looked at the approaching monster, especially its eyes. There was something more there than just rage; there was intelligence in those eyes. Chip fired twice, both bullets aimed at those dreadful eyes. It fell, becoming a lifeless mountain of fur, barely six or seven feet away from him. Chip began to tremble as the howling began again. Hector was the first to come out and look over the monster he'd just shot.

"Nothing wrong with your aim Chip. You get the prize for the biggest one yet."

"That thing must weigh six hundred pounds, maybe more." Said Roxy.

"They must have been breeding, up there in Sub 3." Said Maggie.

All eyes on Maggie, with Hector probably preparing to give his 'that's impossible' speech. Chip was coming round to thinking the same thing as Maggie though.

"We've discussed this before....." Began Hector.

"It's not a discussion." Maggie yelled. "You talk and we're supposed to just listen and agree. That's not a discussion Hector."

"Hey, I've been exploring the Badlands since you were just a gleam in your daddy's eyes."

"She's right Hector, has to be." Said Roxy. "How many have we killed so far ? It has to be at least twenty and I guarantee we'll find more hiding in these other rooms. There must be dozens of them, maybe hundreds."

"I know, but breeding, with no food. That's impossible." Said Hector.

"Anything's possible once you starting fucking about with nature." Said Maggie.

There was that moment, as they listened to the howls approaching from the direction of the only stairs they knew about. It was a group moment, as the hunters knew they were now the hunted.

"They were bred to be smart and there will be more the size of the one Chip just killed. We need to get out of here." Said Roxy.

"There will be a proper people elevator somewhere, maybe several." Said Hector. "Stairs too, if we can find them."

"There should be a central corridor, just like the other floors." Said Chip.

Gone was any idea about wiping out the strange hybrid creatures, their only thought now was to escape. Hector fired a long burst in the direction of the howling and they ran, through another set of serious looking doors and along a dimly lit corridor. Half a mile and few detours later, they emerged into the wide central corridor of Sub Level 4.

"No wonder it's so wet down here." Said Maggie.

"Doesn't explain it being hotter than hell though." Said Roxy.

They heard the water before finding the ravine cut by the underground river. It had obviously changed its course a long time ago, cutting a new way through the lower levels of the bunker. There was no way across, so there was only one direction to go. They ran when the howling was in the distance, firing warning shots when the noises were too close to ignore. Only Maggie managed to hit anything, bringing down a monster who'd been too slow in finding cover.

"It was a lucky shot." She admitted.

"One less to chase after us." Said Chip.

Chip remembered a little about the layout of Sub 4, but he was still pleased when they found the map drawn on the wall. All sorts of organisms that love warm moist air, had attacked the map, especially the outer edges. The central corridor was clear to see though and where it led.

"We're going the right way." Said Chip. "There's a main elevator and stairs, less than half a mile from where we are."

Elevators and stairs were both on the main corridor and where they were was marked with a faded red cross. Chip thanked the thoroughness of the military for things like signs and maps.

"How about an alternative way out, just in case?" Asked Hector.

Typical cynical Hector, but he had a point. Maggie found the second freight elevator and the stairs right next to it. They were a good mile away, but there were just two fairly straight corridors to negotiate.

"We'll try for the proper people elevator." Said Roxy. "If that's fucked in some way, we'll try the freight elevator. These things seem smart, but not smart enough to use an elevator."

Chip wasn't too sure about that, but there was no time to discuss it. There was more howling, more glimpses of huge furry monsters in the distance. They ran, as fast as they possibly could.

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There were a few advantages to being the son-in-law of the now deceased Kealani Lee, besides being married to his daughter. Lee had held stock in ST Air and those shares had passed to his wife after his death. The airline staff didn't know the details of course; they simply knew Bradford as a face which turned up regularly in the news and a relative of a major shareholder. He was always treated well when he flew.

"If my memories are reliable, this will only be my third flight on an airliner." Said Allison.

"I imagined you and Dimitri spending half the year in New Borongan." Said Bradford.

"He did, mainly to see his suppliers. I was always left at home to answer the phone and pretend he was there when he wasn't. I think he had other reasons for traveling alone.... Besides my....

Condition. I suspect he had a pretty young blonde in every port."

They were both in the departure lounge usually reserved for politicians and film stars. They were watching their plane being prepared for take-off. Chris Dudley was booked on the same flight, so they were going to board the plane early and hide in the sumptuous VIP section. Life could be tough being the head of PD489, but it had its perks.

Air travel couldn't be abandoned, though some had called it a throwback to the bad old days and wanted it banned. Families no longer used air travel for holidays, or to visit relatives, it was simply

too expensive. Commerce needed face to face meetings though, so air travel had become almost solely the preserve of big business and politics. Even short hops to places like New Borongan were rationed by the price, about three month's salary for even the well-paid and a lifetime's earnings for some.

"Difficult to imagine that thing flying at three hundred miles an hour." Said Allison.

"Safer than driving on the expressway.... If you believe the statistics."

There were still wells producing oil, but it was all needed for things like plastics. Fossil fuels had destroyed the planet and were completely socially unacceptable. Jet engines were now museum exhibits, as were most petrol driven engines. A few had been converted to run on things like methane, but the future belonged to electric power and the hydrogen cell.

'Flight 1878 for New Borongan, now boarding for blue ticket holders.' Came over the public address. There was no stress, no frantic looking for the right gate or finding the boarding pass. Thanks to the price, all air travel was effectively first class. There were only four boarding gates at San Pablo airport and they were all easy to find. They gave their names and showed their civilian ID cards and the computers did the rest. A few tenths of a second and their IDs were confirmed, their tickets matched and various no fly lists checked.

"Welcome to ST Air, flight 1878. Nonstop to New Borongan."

Said the attractive girl on the gate. Did any planes stop anywhere ? Bradford had never heard of one that did, probably just something they said at departure gates. They were soon out on the tarmac and walking towards the passenger stairs. Allison simply stood there for a few seconds, looking up at the huge dirigible.

"It's like something out of the movies." She said. "I don't think I'd ever get used to travelling in one of these."

The aircraft was over two hundred feet long, the length gave it stability at speed. It was said the dirigibles could fly through a storm without upsetting your lunchtime drinks. It had to be able to, accurate weather forecasting and navigation had gone and weren't likely to return any time soon. The occasional aircraft was forced to land due to storms, but they could descend and moor almost anywhere. One had vanished during a tropical storm and all two hundred on board had been assumed dead. That kind of accident was rare though, it was even taught in modern history at schools.

"You don't get the idea of size, when they go past at five thousand feet." Said Bradford.

Two long cigar shaped rigid gas holders formed the bulk of the aircraft. They were no longer referred to as airships, that was a term from history. The gas used was hydrogen, but the scientists had found ways to stop it being so explosive and inflammable. The mixture of gasses didn't have quite the same lift as pure hydrogen, but there had never been a serious fire on any ST Air craft. Between the two gas holders was the five storey high body of the craft, the part that held up to two hundred passengers and many tons of freight. The entire craft had to be anchored to the ground by several huge mooring clamps. Bradford climbed the steps, Allison behind him, still muttering about the size of the aircraft.

"Bradford and Allison ?" The man in ST Air uniform asked.

"Yes." Answered Allison.

"You've been upgraded to lower deck front. I'll show you to your seats."

"Who upgraded us ?" Asked Allison.

"My wife has connections with the company."

They were given the area where President Herbert himself travelled. Several large and comfortable chairs, set around a long table, covered in bowls of fresh fruit and nibbles. There was even a bottle of the best Pacific Sparking wine, with a card attached.

'With the compliments of The Management.

ST Air.'

Bradford settled himself in a chair far more comfortable than he'd ever actually owned. He was beginning to think of it as an escape rather than a potentially dangerous mission. A few days away from the office and the need to keep so many balls in the air at the same time.

"We'll need to stay here until the aircraft lands." He said. "There mustn't be any chance for Chris Dudley to spot either of us."

"Do we have a private bathroom?"

"Of course."

"No problem then."

As the mooring clamps were released, he filled Maria's glass with the excellent bubbling liquid. He filled his own glass as the huge craft rose gently into the air and the powerful hydrogen cell motors began to turn the propellers that drove the vessel forward.

"I could get used to this." He said.

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Roxy was tired, dusty and feeling generally fed up by the time they reached the elevators. Maggie pressed the button to call the elevator, as Hector fired at anything moving in the shadows. It had been a tough half mile, with Chip gaining a nasty looking gouge across his right shoulder.

"It'll teach you to move a little quicker." Maggie had told him.

Roxy was beginning to understand Maggie and her attitude. Life was tough in the Badlands, even in the relatively safe communities like Desperation. Crap! Even the name spoke volumes about how tough life could be. Maggie had built herself a protective shell, a cast iron twenty two carat attitude. The girl had spent a long time cleaning and fussing over the wound in her boyfriend's shoulder though, which Roxy suspected was Maggie's real personality.

"It was at the top floor." Said Chip.

It wasn't an express elevator, but at least there were no freight only signs. It arrived after what had to have been a very long eight minutes. Maggie just stood there, rigid, frozen to the spot and looking terrified. Roxy had been expecting it to happen and had decided what needed to be done.

"Get in Maggie, we need to be leaving." Shouted Hector. "I think they might try and rush us."

They must have killed dozens of the monsters covered in black stinking fur, yet there always seemed to be more of them. Huge brutes waiting in the shadows, their hate filled eyes glinting in the lights. Hector emptied a full clip, firing in an arc around them, before nodding at her.

"Sorry Maggie, you'll thank me one day." Said Roxy.

Roxy was stronger than she looked, as anyone who crossed her had found out. She lifted Maggie right off the ground, ignoring her struggles and shouts.

"Leave me alone! Let go of me you bitch, we'll all die in there."

Chip tried to get in the way, but Roxy just barged past him, using her elbows to push him out of the way.

"Leave her alone, she's scared." Said Chip.

"Better than being dead." Said Hector.

Hector pushed Chip up against the elevator wall, before pressing the button for Level 1. He fired another burst through the closing doors.

"You had no right to do that to her." Shouted Chip.

Maggie was sat on the floor at the back of the elevator, crying like a baby.

"One day Maggie, when you're old and grey and surrounded by plump grandchildren, you'll thank me for what I just did." Said Roxy.

"Bitch." Said Maggie.

There was fresh blood showing through Chip's jacket. It seemed the struggle had undone all of Maggie's good work.

"You're bleeding Chip. I'll bandage it up for you when we get back to our things." Said Roxy.

"Fuck you !"

The elevator made a lot of screeching noises and the lights flickered, which made Maggie hunker down in the corner. Eight minutes later the doors opened on Level 1. The first thing Roxy noticed was the sweetness of the air.

"Are you alright Mags ?" Asked Hector.

Scared to get in the elevator, she now seemed scared to leave it. No use trying to pull the girl out, they left it to Chip to get Maggie on her feet and out into the corridor. Roxy began to feel guilty, even if she had saved the girl's life. Left down there, Maggie would now probably be creature food. Chip crouched over Maggie, as they slowly trudged towards the room she'd been using. They reminded her of a picture she'd once seen, of Napoleon's retreat from Moscow, wherever that was.

"You had to do it." Said Hector. "Or she'd have been dead by now, us along with her."

"I know, but telling her that will only make her worse."

"At least we have the filters." Said Hector.

Jim hadn't quite managed to get the filters into a side corridor, a wheel appeared to have fallen off the old trolley. Like the elevators and the lights, the trolley had succumbed to effects of age. The bunker looked like a treasure trove, but everything was at least eighty to a hundred years old.

"We'll need to leave here soon." Said Hector. "The creatures seem to prefer the heat down there, but eventually.....They'll get hungry."

They'd swapped over when they found them, Chip being the one receiving attention from Maggie, as she cleaned and bandaged his wounded shoulder. Roxy decided to ignore what had happened in the elevator and the words which had been said. It was far simpler to just get on and tell everyone her orders.

"It's a long way down to Sub four." She said. "Those things will eventually come up here though, so we need to leave here. We'll build some sort of sledge we can pull and load everything onto it."

"I can build that." Said Hector.

"Are we going to unblock the door near the fan ?" Asked Chip.

Good, talking to her and not even glaring , or maybe just a little.

"No, we have no way of jamming it shut again." Said Roxy. "Those creatures will eventually get out and cause trouble in the Badlands, but we need to delay that awful day."

"I can see that." Said Maggie. "It'll give us time to warn the other settlements."

"Maybe even get some help from Camila." Added Hector.

Good, as she'd hoped, her small band had a civilised conversation going on. Now came the bit some of them might not like.

"No more elevators." Said Maggie.

"No more elevators, I promise." Said Roxy. "We'll walk right to the other side of Level One and go out through the main door. It closes slowly, more than enough time to pull the switch and get out."

"All that way.... A mile and a half, maybe more." Muttered Maggie.

Roxy knew that Maggie was emotionally drained. If she panicked they'd have to open up the small back door. That would probably mean the hybrid monsters spreading across the Badlands and attacking settlements within days. Maggie actually smiled at her.

"I can do that, though I'll need more ammunition." She said.

"You shall have it, as much as we can carry." Said Hector.

"It all needs to be done before we sleep tonight." Said Roxy. "Hector can build the sledge while we collect together what we want to take with us. The filters of course, food, water, ammunition and maybe a few more assault rifles. Once the sledge is loaded up we'll add more tinned food, but not too much.... We need to be able to pull it."

"They'd kill for tinned hotdogs in Pile o' Bones." Said Chip.

"Come on then." Said Roxy. "Let's get busy."

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The flight from San Pablo had been speedy and uneventful. There were people waiting to follow Dudley from the airport, some of Bobby Laszlo's people. He'd promised to use his best local people for the job and Bobby only ever hired the best.

"If Dudley sees me he'll run and New Borongan is a large group of islands." Said Bradford. "We need to wait here for as long as we can."

A young woman came to find them after about fifteen minutes, suggesting that they should disembark. A few Herberts bought them a further ten minutes. When they did emerge onto the tarmac, there was a uniformed porter ready with their bags on a trolley.

"They said you'd be along soon."

No questions, no looking them up and down for signs of having sex on the aircraft. Bradford doubted if he'd have had that much self-control and decided to give the man a large tip. There was only one vehicle left in the pickup area, ignoring the few remaining cabbies.

'Ramirez Family.'

Said the sign being held by Bobby Laszlo, though Bradford hadn't been expecting Bobby to be there himself.

"Now I know why you haven't been flirting with my wife recently."

"You said you wanted my best people Bradford, so here I am."

Their car had a Dodge badge, which was just another lie of course. There was a factory in the south of the island which would happily badge a car with any name you wanted. The vehicle was fairly old and battered, but it had space inside and all their bags fitted into the trunk.

"Where is Dudley going?" Asked Bradford.

"North, though that could change." Said Bobby. "I've a dozen vehicles out there, driven by the young, old, scruffy and smart. There's even a family in a methane burning camper van. Dudley won't spot them and they won't lose him."

There were cellphones in New Borongan, but they only talked to each other. Even his PD489 communicator was useless that kind of distance from its home base. He saw Allison looking at her phone.

"Service not found." She said, holding up her expensive phone.

"They did talk about linking the service to San Pablo." Said Bobby. "Then President Herbert called New Borongan a pariah state. There are the links using undersea cables, but they're all monitored."

"So we're on our own." Said Bradford.

"You've got me and you can buy just about anything in Borongan." Said Bobby.

To the locals New Borongan was just Borongan, named after a city in the Philippines. The entire population of that city had survived a particularly nasty period of Earth's history and had been some of the first inhabitants of the New Nations.

"I decided to upgrade you a bit." Said Bobby. "The hotel you booked is really just a brothel with a restaurant."

"Hey, I've some fond memories of that crap hole." Said Bradford.

In yet another homage to the past, their vehicle was pulled up in front of the Borongan Hilton.

"Nice Bobby, but it's a bit outside of my budget." Said Bradford.

"All taken care of, you're booked in as Mr and Mrs Ramirez. Enjoy yourselves."

Bradford almost objected, but he had been looking for a short escape and the Borongan Hilton looked the perfect venue for a luxurious escape.

"Fine, just let me know where Dudley finally settles."

"I will, cross my heart and all that."

The reception desk didn't even ask for ID, which was just as well. Bobby had booked them into the honeymoon suite, but he'd always had a quirky sense of humour.

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They hadn't heard a sound during their long trudge through the bunker, apart from the sound of dripping water somewhere in the distance. No howling, no attack, no disgusting odours, yet they'd all been jumpy. Chip had even fired into the shadows twice, though they'd found no evidence of him hitting anything.

"Something is following us, I can feel it." Chip had said, several times.

"We're all jumpy, try to relax." Roxy had told him.

They were currently waiting at the huge front door to the bunker while Hector made a few last minute adjustments to the sledge he'd built. Roxy was quite impressed with the sledge he'd welded together out of four girders and a little angle iron. There was even a canvass cover to keep the weather off their precious supplies.

"I never for one moment thought you produce anything this good." She told him.

"They have a fully equipped workshop. It's all really old, but that doesn't matter with chrome steel tools. Pity to leave it all really."

The plan was simple though that hadn't stopped them from discussing it at length. Roxy would open the door and stand guard while others dragged the sledge outside. She'd then push the switch to close the door and get out before it closed. Simple, but Hector had wanted to be the one left inside.

"Supposing you trip and fall over?" Maggie had asked.

"Then I'll open the door and start again."

There had been many other objections, before they'd all agreed to her original plan.

"You can do it all from here." Said Chip.

He was looking at the panel which contained the switch to open the door. There was writing and a large button, but Roxy hadn't bothered with anything other than the door switch.

"What can we do from there?" Asked Hector.

"Set the full lockdown if the nukes are dropping." Said Chip.

They all huddled around him, reading the important information, which had been written in surprisingly small print.

"He's right, it just requires two four digit numbers.... Which we don't have." Said Roxy.

She was angry because for a moment or two, she'd hoped there might be a way of sealing up the monsters forever. Nothing was going to claw itself out of a bunker on full lockdown.

“But I have the numbers.” Said Chip. “I saw them in with the Ouroboros stuff and wrote them down.... I mean.... There’s no knowing when something like that might be useful.”

Roxy kissed him, a full open mouthed kiss.

“I love you Chip. Let’s get it done.”

Roxy opened the door and stood with her rifle ready, as the others pulled the sledge well away from the bunker. She had Chip’s notebook, but used her finger to write the numbers in the gritty grey dust on the reception desk.

‘6056 – 5543’

She thought the others would remain outside, but Chip came back, a worried look on his face.

“It might change the timing, or it might not.” He said. “The door I mean, it might close a lot quicker.”

“Then I’ll run Chip..... Get outside.”

When they were all outside, she hung her rifle over her shoulder and entered the first four numbers, before pressing the red button. There was the wail of a siren, though it sounded to be in a different part of the bunker.

“Here we go.” She muttered.

She entered the final four numbers and looked at the distance to the front door. She’d never been the kind to enjoy sports, but the Badlands had kept her fit. She could get out of the door in four seconds, maybe five, no sweat.

“Fuck !”

The siren began as soon as she hit the red button and this time it was somewhere close and deafening. The door was racing to close too, moving at ten times the speed it had the first time she’d closed it. Roxy ran and something was running with her.

“Run Roxy !” Yelled Hector. “There’s a big one just behind you.”

“Run, run, run.” Shouted Maggie.

No one firing, the creature was right behind her, close enough for her nose to catch a whiff of its stench. She ran at the closing door, wondering if there was going to be a big enough gap for her to fit through. Instinctively she leapt, like a runner going for the line. She was under the door, the sound of the thing growling in her ears. She landed and rolled, curling herself up into a ball.

“Don’t fire, you’ll hit Roxy.” Hector yelled.

The world seemed to slow down a little, as she heard the monster scream. There was the clear sound of the door crushing its bones as it closed. Roxy looked down, expecting to see her feet crushed off at the ankles. She’d made it though, everything was intact. Bruised though, she was grateful for Hector’s help to get back on her feet.

“Damn thing, came out of nowhere.” She said.

“They’re too damn smart.... I’m glad we sealed them up forever.”

Roxy wasn’t so sure, the hybrids were part human after all. She thought they’d find a way out someday, but at least the settlements would have been warned.

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