

Bradford II – Badlands

Chapter 15 – Omega Base

“Weapons weren’t a problem in Borongan. You could probably buy an artillery piece if you had the right contacts. Bobby did know the right people and they all had the latest military grade weapons.”

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Camila knew it was one of those universal truth things. Give people weapons and food and they still might not trust you, but they’ll smile and pretend they do. At least no one in Desperation was likely to have a copy of that month’s San Pablo Vogue.

“We’ve only just heard from them.” Said Bob. “Hector and Roxy took Maggie and Jim with them and poor Jim is dead, killed in a helivator crash, or some such. The widow Curtis is in a terrible condition, or so I heard.”

Bob wasn’t stupid, he just hadn’t been anywhere other than the Badlands for a very long time. It took a while to get the whole story, though the messenger from Pile o’ Bones had only given Bob a few details about Jim’s death. It appeared there wouldn’t even have been a messenger if someone called Muriel hadn’t insisted it was the decent thing to do.

“They want some of their things, Roxy sent a list.” A woman told them. “If you’re headed for Pile o’ Bones anyway, it’d save us sending someone.”

“Stick it all in the APC and I’ll make sure they get it.”

They were in Desperation for less than two hours and an hour of that had been spent in waiting for Bob to find a few things on Roxy’s list. They had the gist of the news before they left, about the dreadful creatures now sealed up inside an old military bunker. Hector and Roxy needed a few things and they had intended to meet her in three days time. Then they were off to look at another bunker even deeper into the Badlands.

“There are worse monsters there, all sorts of nasty varmints, or so they said.” Bob had said.

Bob was the only person she’d ever met who could use the word varmint and keep a straight face. Her next course of action seemed obvious. Camila had Bob scribble a few instructions on how to get to Pile o’ Bones. She let Cruz drive, while she quietly enjoyed the prospect of having a good excuse to be out of San Pablo for a few days, maybe even weeks or months.

“That Hector, he’s a crap magnet.” Said Cruz. “An old bunker full of weird monsters and he just had to be the one to find it.”

“Bradford will be upset.” She said. “A genuine monster hunt and he missed it.”

It would be more complicated than that of course, though she’d have to wait to get the detail from Hector and Roxy. Their rented APC came without weapons, but Camila had brought quite a few with them. She lovingly patted the barrel of a hand held railgun, before adjusting the chair to recline as far as it would go.

“Wake me up when we get there.” She said.

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Bradford had slept on the cold metal floor of PD489 helicopters. After that the sofa in the honeymoon suite of the Borongan Hilton was downright luxurious. He woke up with a feeling that something was wrong, before understanding what was wrong. No messages from Roland, no trying

to fit thirty six hours of work into a twenty four hour day. For the first time in a very long time, he'd slept for seven glorious hours of undisturbed slumber.

"Oh, you're awake. I ordered breakfast, lots of it." Said Allison. "I hope you have a big appetite. I can't eat it all on my own."

There she was, wandering about in a short diaphanous piece of clothing. It had been a gift from the management of the hotel. Some might have called it a negligée, or a nightdress, but Bradford thought of it as a torture device. It had been a while since he'd had a night of unrestrained sex with Amoe.

"Crap Allison. Please get dressed."

"You're no fun Bradford. Do I get to keep this ? It's beautiful."

She gave him a twirl, which generated all sorts of feelings he'd prefer to have kept buried.

"I'm sure it's included in the enormous bill. Now scram, get dressed !"

She sighed and vanished into the bathroom, leaving him to sign for breakfast while still only wearing his boxer shorts. The trolley seemed to have everything from the breakfast buffet, enough for a hungry hockey team. Borongan had a drier and hotter climate than San Pablo. There were exotic fruits on the trolley, which he didn't even recognise. Allison found him still picking at a few things he did recognise.

"Don't be timid, take large bites out of life Bradford. We only pass this way once."

Was it supposed to be a metaphor ? It certainly sounded as though she was trying to make a point.

He did fill his plate with quite a few mystery foods and nearly everything tasted wonderful. They were still eating when there was a call from the reception desk. A few minutes later Bobby and Tony were stood in the honeymoon suite.

"It's very..... Pink." Commented Bobby.

"No Little Vic ?" Asked Bradford. "I thought he and Tony were joined at the hip ?"

"Vic has chores to do back home." Said Bobby. "Chris Dudley is still using the Nathan Huffman identity. My people followed him north into the mangroves. He's living in an old plantation house about ten miles from anywhere. Perfect for us in many ways."

"You could have army manoeuvres there and no one would know." Added Tony.

"How many men does he have ?" Asked Bradford.

"Just two, he seems to be trusting his safety to hiding in the middle of nowhere." Said Tony.

Bobby began to graze off their breakfast trolley without asking.

"Try those, they're delicious." Said Allison, pointing.

"So, are we going to visit Dudley now, or do you want us to come back later ?" Asked Bobby.

There was a look in Bobby's eyes as he said later, the same look of mischief he'd had about booking them into the honeymoon suite. Bradford thought he'd rather have wrestled with the ghost of Samuel, than risk a day in that suite with Allison and her notion of appropriate clothing.

"We'll go now." He said.

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Maria Gonsalves loved her job, though she accepted that many would have found it boring, maybe even a bit tedious. She had a few obsessions, but her main one was MDI and what it promised for the future. Mass Data Collection had been the original name, but it had been her idea to call it Mass Data Interception.

"Collection gives the game away." She'd told a team meeting. "Interception implies we're targeting individuals, even if we aren't. Interception makes it easier for politicians to accept and sell to the public."

Her teams had grown to fill several new buildings in a purpose built campus style compound not that far from where the Police Academy at Joyce's Green had once stood. Her team was now many teams of staff too numerous to know personally. So many staff were involved in MDI, that President Herbert had decided to make the number an official secret.

"I can always find the funding Maria." He'd told her. "Can you guarantee it will work?"

"Yes I can Mr President. It will be fully operational soon, very soon."

Every piece of information in San Pablo and some of the other New Nations, all funnelled into her new computer complex. Phone calls, messages, network mail and search activity, employment records and the banking activity of every individual. All of it examined by her super computers, to produce the intelligence equivalent of pure gold. There had already been results, information given to the police, supposedly from paid informants. Bradford was cynical of course, though he did at least understand the concept of MDI.

"I get it Maria, I really do." He'd told her at her place, after half a bottle of Devil's Promise.

"Why bother with thousands of low level and often unreliable informants, when your super computer can listen to everything, read everything and tell you who wants to blow up somewhere or other, or assassinate Otis Herbert. Clever of Otis to bring in the encryption act by the way, making it mandatory for the intelligence services to be given a back door into all methods of data encryption. That will backfire of course and cause all sorts of shit to happen."

He was always the same, talking like a subversive once he'd had three glasses of booze. The problem was that he was often right.

"Why will it cause trouble?" She'd asked him.

"Because your small circle of trusted people will grow and some will leave, probably because they feel pissed off for some reason. Your secret back door will get out of its Pandora's Box. The bad guys will begin to make money exploiting the holes you created in the system. You'll probably have to blame it on software errors and cause a lot of good people to lose their jobs."

She'd wanted to shout at him, but she went to get more wine instead. He was right of course, that was what really stung. She'd been thinking of getting the computer system to work, yet her real problem would be people, it always was. The brilliant nerds who wore mountain boots to the Christmas party and kept sending her pictures of goats in trees. They were the ones who'd cause her system to be shut down, unless she increased the level of internal control. She'd returned to Bradford, a cold bottle of Devil's promise in her hand.

"Of course there is one huge problem with MDI." He'd told her. "You'll never be able to build computers fast enough to analyse all the data collected every day, all those trillions of messages and phone calls every year."

He'd almost been right and quantum computers had never materialised. They were like cold fusion, the Piltown Man and zero calorie ice cream. Nice ideas, but basically a load of crap. There had been advances in data searching though, better use of heuristics. Her super computers were still taking a few days to come up with answers to specific queries, but they were learning to be better every day, the AI evolving. She'd sent an excellent report to Otis Herbert the day before, on the Jason Cetrone property scam business. Her internal phone interrupted her thoughts.

"Yes? I did say no calls!"

"The front desk just called Ms Gonsalves. There are two senior naval officers who want to see you.

They have to see you on a matter of some urgency, something involving the president."

"Do their IDs check out?"

Silly question, of course they did. Thanks to a little Bradford inspired paranoia, the security in her department was now seconds to none. All new employees were vetted annually and part of that vetting included a few hours with the department's tame shrink. It was a pity, they were often brilliant, but she now rarely employed the kind of people who wore mountain boots to office parties. "Yes, they were checked three times and through PD489."

"Fine, have them sent up."

"They want you to go to the front desk Ms Gonsalves. They were very clear about that."

Damn, just when she'd wanted a quiet day with her pet, the AI which ran MDI. Strangely she'd named her car, her music system and her food processor, but not the AI.

"I'll be there in five minutes."

Senior naval officers sounded right, Otis had developed a thing about trust after Jason's betrayal. San Pablo was an island group, the navy had been the first arm of the military to be reformed after the troubles. It made sense for Otis to trust the senior navy people. Maria saw two men in dark blue uniforms standing at the front desk and assumed they were the ones.

"Hello, I'm Maria Gonsalves. I believe you have a message from the president?"

"We have a shielded APC in the car park. We'd like you to come with us. It will only take a few minutes."

She couldn't help chuckling. They wanted her to leave the most secure building anywhere on San Pablo, to read a message in an APC.

"Our security is second to none. You can give me the information here."

"Please.... Indulge one of the president's eccentricities. It will really only take a few minutes."

"Very well."

The APC was close to the doors, in the area reserved for those with walking difficulties. Once she was inside the APC, she realised why they'd insisted on her being there.

"Hello Maria, I thought your report was brilliant, but maybe a bit too clever."

He was there, drink in hand, the voice which was supposed to be worth a few million votes.

President Herbert waved her towards the chair opposite his. Her report was on a small table, the report predicting the next three people on someone's tidying up loose ends list.

"A drink? And I'm Otis until you leave this APC."

"Wine.... Thank you.... Otis."

They even had her favourite, a cold bottle of Devil's Promise. It was strange to be served ice cold wine by an admiral, but Otis did have his eccentricities. Wine during working hours felt wonderful and wrong, all at the same time.

"I wanted to talk about your report. I noticed it was credited to your new mass collection system. Is it fully operational now?"

"Still slower than hoped I'm afraid. The AI learns, the way a child learns. Another year or two and it will produce a report like that in a matter of seconds."

Otis was giving her a look which lacked his usual warmth. Her list had Chris Dudley right at the top and she knew where Bradford was. Her report didn't hint, it stated that someone with money and resources was tidying up loose ends. There had always been the unspoken assumption that the tidy-upper might well be Otis Herbert. Suddenly being in a closed APC with him didn't seem pleasant. He had invested millions of Herberts in public money in her though and Otis loathed waste.

"Hmmm... You probably know Bradford is in New Borongan?"

"Yes, I do."

“Good man Bradford, he knows who his friends are. He believes that the most important thing is the security and wellbeing of the population on San Pablo. I’m sure you feel the same, in fact I know you do. I promoted you both well beyond your years, simply because I believe you share my values.”

Oh Crap, the turn a blind eye order was coming, she knew it. She didn’t really care though. If he’d asked her, she’d have gladly killed Jason and sent someone after Dudley.

“I do share your values Otis. I have no intention of showing the report to anyone else. Bradford said something to me once, when we both part timers, unpaid interns at PD489. The office then was an anonymous building with pest control one side and the people who give out parking tickets the other. He told me any society needs its own form of PD489, when it gets to the point where it can take years and millions of dollars to achieve what one man with a revolver used to achieve in the past. I have some reservations, but I’m proud to call you and Bradford my friends.”

He had that spark in his eyes again, the wonderful voice was back. Had she just avoided being found in a hole in the Badlands ? Maybe, but she chose not to think about it.

“It can be a hard job being president Maria. Sugar coating what the public needs, to make them think it’s something they want. I’m glad you see things my way. Bradford as some old time sheriff... Now that is an image that’ll stick in my head for a while. Finish your wine and then I must let you get back to your work.”

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Roxy heard the commotion outside as the APC was spotted coming down the track from Iron Pan Hill. An APC could mean the security services looking for subversives, or more property developers looking for places to build low cost housing. Some of the residents of Pile o’ Bones remained indoors, while others stood in what passed for the main street and waited. Roxy didn’t see anyone panic. Maggie was there of course, leaning her newly acquired assault rifle on the top of a hastily erected barricade.

“It’s clean and new, probably a rental and they’re approaching slowly, giving us time to get used to the idea of them arriving. Don’t anyone get trigger happy, it might be people I know.” Said Roxy. Hector was close by, using a pair of military binoculars he’d found in the bunker. The good people of Pile o’ Bones were beginning to bring out whatever weapons they owned, some even wielding rusty axes.

“Who is it ? Can you see anything ?” She asked Hector.

It looked so out of place, a modern matt black APC, moving along a track usually only used by human feet. Hector seemed to spot something, clambering up onto an old oil drum to get a better look.

“She’ll lose her security deposit.” He said. “Camila had the good sense to paint a Hyenas tag on the front.”

“It’s alright, it’s someone we know.” Shouted Roxy.

No one rushed to put down their weapons as the APC purred up to the barricades. It stopped and Camila came out first, hands held high.

“Don’t shoot, I’ve brought medicines and food supplements.” Shouted Camila. “And all the crap Roxy asked for.”

On the whole enemies tend not to arrive bearing gifts. Roxy had seen it before, the almost instant friendships that can spring out of nowhere in the Badlands. Within a few minutes Camila had a happy line of people, carrying boxes into the town’s storage hut. Half an hour later the APC was under cover and Camila was listening to the long version of events in the bunker from Maggie.

“..... then we found tins of hot dogs, but the bread mix was out of date...”

It was a long and rambling tale, with Chip adding a few of his own memories. Cruz had already rolled his eyes and gone for a walk, but Camila seemed happy to listen to even the smallest details. It was the story a mad man would come up with, but being told by Maggie gave it authenticity. When the story reached finding Jim in the elevator shaft, Hector nodded at her before going outside. Roxy didn't need any persuasion to join him.

"Crap that girl has a good memory for details." She said. "Too damn good."

"Camila will want us to go through the maps with her next." Said Hector. "Looking for Omega base in her APC will be far easier and more comfortable than doing the journey on foot. Ideally we'd go on horseback, but well..... You know."

"Yes Hector, the only horses left are in zoos..... You worry me sometimes Hector, you really do. Has Camila definitely agreed to go with us?"

"Hmmm she will, otherwise she wouldn't be listening to Maggie. I have the water filters in place, come and help me connect up the pipes. It'll be our turn to go through everything after the evening meal. Camila is very thorough."

"I'm already jealous of her pencils and proper notebooks."

Hector had already fixed the filter elements in place and run piping to the where the well water entered a large covered tank. Only the arrival of the APC had stopped the completion of the job. She helped him bend lengths of copper pipe, soldering connectors where needed. It looked a bit of a botched job, but it was solid and likely to work well for decades.

"I had to get the filters installed." Said Hector. "Otherwise poor Jim would have died for nothing. Now we can get into the APC and move on, knowing we kept our promise."

"Have you seen the widow Curtis?"

"No, but Maggie said she's taken to her bed."

"We should see her before we leave Hector."

"Ok."

There was a lot of testing to do after the last bolt was tightened on the last connector, mainly by pulling and tugging to make sure nothing was likely to break. There were a few curious heads looking their way, when they drained the massive water storage tank.

"No point pouring clean water into a tank full of dirty water." Said Hector.

Muriel arrived, self-appointed queen of the kitchen in Pile o' Bones. She didn't say anything, though she did look amazed when Hector let the filters run for a while. All that precious water, allowed to run off into the ground.

"He did this in Desperation." Said Roxy. "Don't worry, the filters need to be wet for a while to work properly."

Eventually crystal clear water began to flow and Hector fixed the outflow pipe into the storage tank. All of Pile o' Bones had to come and taste the water of course, every single man woman and child who could get there. They sniffed, they drank water as though it was the finest ale. As these things often do, it became an excuse for a town party. Muriel even brought out some of her famous cakes.

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It was such a contrast from the luxurious honeymoon suite at the Borongan Hilton. Bobby had pulled off the road and talked to his people on the ground, before they all began trudging through the mangrove swamps. Bradford hated having wet boots and being bitten by flying insects and he'd been trained for such things. Poor Allison had to be suffering, but she wasn't showing it.

"We picked up the signals from movement detectors and there might be pressure pads near the plantation house." Said Bobby. "I'll get us as close as I can, then it's your call Bradford."

Weapons weren't a problem in Borongan. You could probably buy an artillery piece if you had the right contacts. Bobby did know the right people and they all had the latest military grade weapons. With Bobby's local men there were eight of them, more than enough to get the job done. No communications of course, Dudley probably had all sorts of detectors installed in his sanctuary in the swamps.

"What are his ways out once we're spotted?" Bradford asked.

"A choice of two fairly old cars and a swamp skimmer." Said Tony. "The skimmer is a one person job and takes some skill to steer. My guess is that Dudley will go for the newer of the two cars."

Bradford stopped walking and looked in the direction of the plantation house. It was still some way off, but he could just make out the top of two chimney stacks. He hadn't seen any watchers, but his sixth sense born out of experience, was warning him not to assume anything. They were all looking at him, eight people waiting for his orders.

"Is your hand held device reliable Bobby?" He asked. "Will it ping when their sensors spot something?"

"Yes, it's the best kit on the market. My tech is always the best."

"I need your two fastest runners Bobby. Get one to go for the cars and another to head for the skimmer. Their one and only job is to destroy his transport out of here. When his sensors spot them we begin running towards the house. I need Dudley alive, that's really important."

"No problem he's easy to spot." Said Tony.

"An oriental looking guy with a huge gut." Added Bobby. "He can't weigh much under three hundred pounds. Don't worry, he isn't likely to get shot by accident."

The two runners were armed with weapons capable of destroying a tank and given grenades too.

They left, running between the mangroves with surprising speed.

"They know the terrain from weekends spent Swamp Devil hunting." Said Bobby.

"What's a Swamp Devil?" Asked Allison.

"Probably best if I tell you once we're out of the swamp."

Six minutes later Bobby told them that his device was picking up a lot of noise from detectors at either side of the house.

"They know we're here." Said Bobby.

"Run behind me Allison, as close as you can get." Said Bradford. "So close that you'll run into me if I stop."

She nodded at him and they were off. Not running quite as fast as the two locals, but they managed a good fast pace. He could see the front of the house when the first explosion took place, the sound coming from the direction where the cars were parked. The second explosion was quieter and further away, but probably meant the skimmer wasn't going anywhere.

"Oomf."

"Sorry."

Allison had run into him as he'd stopped. There was little cover close to the house, though so far at least he hadn't heard or seen the effect of any blaster fire. He was about to take a huge risk, but so far he hadn't seen any watchers.

"Stay behind me Allison. I'm going through the front door. Once we're inside you need to do whatever it takes to be safe. Anything, I'm sure you understand."

"Yes, I'm certain I can control it now, my personal monster."

Gillian had measured his speed once and he could reach about forty miles an hour for short bursts. He hit the door hard and someone must have pushed a few bolts home on the inside. For a fraction

of a second he thought his bones might be crushed, but he was far tougher than any wooden door. The door became a pile of kindling, as he ran into a large hallway, with stairs on the right. Allison was still with him and Booby was there about half a minute later.

“Bobby, clear every downstairs room. Allison and I are going upstairs.”

He knew where to go after seeing the young girl stood halfway up the stairs. A watcher, there was the whole too real to be real thing going on. It was as if the hallway was in analogue, while the girl was in super definition digital. She looked about nineteen, a girl you wouldn't look twice at in any San Pablo crowd.

“This will be bad Allison, be ready.”

They both had their blasters ready as he took the steps two at a time. There was a guard in front of a door, crouched behind a chair, trying to offer the smallest possible target. The guard fired his blaster twice, but Bradford was now moving fast, his reaction time fifteen times that of an un-augmented human. Bradford put a neat round hole in the guard's chest before he could fire for a third time. Only important doors need guards, so it was probably Dudley's bedroom. Bradford stood there for a few seconds, trying to work out where he'd have been standing, if he'd been waiting to kill anyone coming through the door. It was a weird kind of seventh or eighth sense, which didn't really make any sense at all. It had often worked though.

“I'll go through the door and right, you drop low to the left.”

She didn't look scared, which was good. He just hoped he wasn't about to get her killed. Bradford ran at the door, using his already bruised elbows to shatter the wooden panels. He went right and Dudley missed him, but Allison was a bit too slow in getting down low.

“Oh, you fucker !” She yelled.

Another guard, armed with a gun which fired bullets. Rare but Bradford recognised the sound as the cordite weapon had fired, its bullet gouging a nasty looking wound across Allison's right shoulder. The guard fired again, but he was too slow. He wasn't fighting Allison anymore, the beast within her was running at him. The beast easily avoided the second shot.

“Christ ! You brought her.” Yelled Dudley. “She'll kill us all.”

Dudley knew what Allison capable of and he actually dropped his blaster and sat on the floor, as if waiting for a death he knew was coming for him. It wasn't that Allison physically changed, it was all done in her mind. She crouched as she ran, he elbows held at a strange angle, her head held back. It was if modern day Allison had gone, replaced by something far more ancient and dangerous.

“I'll give you anything.” Said Dudley. “Ten million, twenty.... Enough to live out your life in luxury.”

Allison wasn't interested in Dudley, the guard was still her target. She leapt at him at such a speed, with so much force... They hit a window, shattering the wooden frame and the glass. Allison and the guard were through the window and gone, replaced by screaming coming from outside.

“You should never have brought her.” Whimpered Dudley.

Bradford used plastic ties on his wrists and ankles, before sitting the huge man on the floor. Judging by the screaming coming from outside, Allison was still the beast and punishing the guard for shooting at her. Bobby came into the room with his men, all looking unhurt but shocked by the sounds coming from outside the house.

“Allison is on our side.” Said Bradford. “No matter what comes through that door, you don't use your weapons. I can control her.”

“You fool.” Shouted Dudley. “No one can control her, apart from poor dead Dimitri.”

What came back through the door was covered in blood, but it wasn't the beast. Allison walked across the room and sat cross legged in front of Chris Dudley.

“Let me kill him.”

“Maybe later.” Said Bradford.

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The following morning and Maggie knew the argument about taking Chip was going to carry on for a while. Camila hadn't sugar coated her comments the night before.

“I know you can handle yourself, but him ! He'll get himself killed and maybe some of us too.

Anyway, there are a few experienced older men to choose from.”

She hadn't slept that well and packing her things for the trip had been a nightmare. She had tried to concentrate, but her mind kept going back to leaving Chip behind. For some reason Hector seemed sure that Camila would agree to Chip being with them on the trip into the heart of the Badlands.

“Trust me.” He'd told her. “Chip will be with us when we head out of Pile o' Bones.”

Roxy had mentioned Chip having a little brain fog sometimes and Maggie had mentioned his poor night vision. Camila had seemed so nice, so genuinely interested in everything she'd said. It was annoying to know she'd been played, her honesty used against poor Chip. The canvas door to where she slept was drawn back, to reveal Muriel carrying an old biscuit tin.

“Here, I brought you a tin of my famous cookies.” Said Muriel.

The tin was a bit beaten up, the original logo impossible to read. It would keep the cookies fresh though and Muriel's cookies were famously good. Maggie didn't even mind unzipping her bag for about the tenth time that morning.

“What's wrong Mags ? You look like you lost million dollars.”

“It's her, that bitch Camila. She's said Chip can't go with us.”

“He's going, I just gave him his own tin of cookies. Chip is all packed and was on his way to the APC when I saw him.”

Maggie ran through town and out to where the large APC was waiting to leave. Hector was there, loading up a few boxes of supplies, while Roxy fitted a 50 calibre machine gun into the roof turret. Chip was sat in the front of the APC, looking as though he hadn't a care in the world.

“I'm glad you're going with us.” She said. “How did you get Camila to change her mind ?”

“I didn't, not really. It was Hector, telling her I had a 'unique rapport' with computers. Not sure if he should have done that, but I'm happy to be going.”

She might have kissed him if Roxy hadn't been grinning at them both like a demented Cheshire cat.

Maggie got into the APC with him and gave him a quick hug.

“Hector said he'd fix it.” She said. “So who's going with us ?”

“Hector and Roxy of course. Us and the new people, Camila and Cruz. I thought they'd take someone like Big Mike, but Camila said six was enough living together in one APC.”

“She has a point.”

Maggie was happy and she was still happy an hour later, when the APC growled its way out of town and headed towards where they hoped to find Omega Base.

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