

Bradford II – Badlands

Chapter 16 – Air Gupta

“Strangely the land was less barren as they headed further into the Badlands. There were areas covered in a short wiry looking grass. Bushes too, some quite large. Roxy just hit the bushes head on, it was easier than swerving about. The few full grown trees she showed a little more respect and drove around them.”

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Gupta Saunders loved the PD489 Vertical take-off and landing craft, VTOL for short. One of the tech guys had opened up an inspection cover once, allowing him to see the high tech toroidal motors.

“This is the most advanced aircraft on the planet.”

The tech guy had said with some pride. That wasn't as huge as it sounded, not after the troubled times planet Earth had been through. Gupta loved the VTOL though, with its quiet flight, smoothness and very long range. It had one other huge advantage over most military aircraft being used in the New Nations. It had been designed for stealth. Not that detecting intruders in a nation's airspace was as good as it had been. There were no working satellites, so everyone relied on radar systems, which were generations out of date. Through design and various coatings to the outside surface, the VTOL was almost undetectable to radar.

“About the same radar profile as a large bird, something like an Albatross.”

A military weapons researcher had told them, after PD489 had been given their new toy. A few rules had come with the VTOL, all good gifts tend to come with rules and potential consequences. Much as your favourite aunt won't want you losing or giving away the jumper she knitted you for Christmas. The San Pablo government had given PD489 a list of rules. Two of them were currently worrying Gupta.

One – Don't allow the VTOL to be destroyed.

Two – Don't allow the craft to fall into enemy hands.

Location was the worry and the constant threat of breaking at least one of those rules. Gupta was inside the VTOL with half a dozen PD489 operatives, all dressed as subversives. The advanced and very expensive VTOL was on the ground, under camouflage netting. Gupta was Bradford's escape plan, a way off New Borongan with Chris Dudley and whoever else he might have captured.

“I can hardly pack him in a crate, or take him tied up and gagged to the airport. I'm relying on you Gupta, to swoop in and get us out of there.” Bradford had told him.

Gupta sighed, a long worried sigh. The six operatives looked so unconcerned. They ate, they slept, they played cards. Sometimes they walked around the tiny island about two miles off the New Borongan coast. It was a safe spot to wait, the camouflage netting made them almost invisible, unless a fishing boat got too close. Gupta sighed again, the next ping was already three minutes late. 'Beep.'

He relaxed a little. Bradford had a tiny transmitter with a long life battery, over six months if used as directed. It wasn't directional and used a very low frequency, well outside most radio communications. No one was going to spot the hourly beep, unless they were very lucky and the signal was too brief to track. A single beep meant all is well, two beeps meant come to the pickup

point. No beeps for four hours meant take the expensive toy back home, were probably dead or captured.

"It's the waiting." He muttered. "Drives me nuts."

He walked towards the bathroom, his sixth pee in less than three hours. Stress made his bladder insist on being emptied all the time and peeing gave him something to do. No more ration packs though, not until the evening. Gupta was a comfort eater and already beginning to eat far too much. Soon he'd be undoing the buttons on his uniform shirt.

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Roxy enjoyed driving the APC, even if she didn't have a valid license or any insurance.

"Don't sweat it, who are you going to hit out here?"

Had been Hector's idea of an encouraging remark. There were mounds built by insects though and deep seismic holes, some quite wide. They had the maps copied from the screens in the bunker, but they'd been drawn up before the time of troubles. The world had changed, San Pablo was no longer part of a large continent. There were rumours that there was no longer ice in the far north, though she'd never met anyone who'd actually been there.

"There's a storm building to the north, a nasty one." She said.

Not that the navigation systems in the APC were telling her where was north. Like every other compass, the one in their vehicle was fluctuating wildly. Some said it was the huge iron deposits in the ground, while others blamed something left over from the troubles. No one really knew of course. Roxy had the maps though and they told her she was driving west and the storm was in the North.

"With luck it'll stay in the north." Said Cruz.

Strangely the land was less barren as they headed further into the Badlands. There were areas covered in a short wiry looking grass. Bushes too, some quite large. Roxy just hit the bushes head on, it was easier than swerving about. The few full grown trees she showed a little more respect and drove around them.

"Stop if the storm heads our way." Said Camila. "We don't want to drive into a hole in the dark."

"I know, I'm not stupid."

There was Hector, grinning like a fool. He'd told her she'd bicker with Camila and end up hating her. Luckily the storm carried on being a nuisance to the north and she saw the canyon's edge in time. Roxy brought the APC to a halt.

"Jeeez, that isn't on the map." Said Maggie.

"A lot of stuff isn't on the maps." Said Hector.

Roxy left the APC and walked right up to the edge of the canyon, the others following her. It was over a mile wide and deep, very deep. There was a stream running along the bottom, with a line of lush vegetation on either side of it. It all looked so new, the rocks still rough and sharp, where a vast gash had been pulled out of the ground. The world had changed a lot during the troubles, the Earth had been damaged and scarred. Again, there were theories about the effect of so much ice being lost so quickly, but no one really knew why.

"There must be a way across it somewhere." Said Chip.

It was go north or south and the storm was in the north. No good looking at the maps, they didn't show any of the damage the troubles had caused to the terrain. Hector had a plan, he always did. He held a coin in his fingers, a half dollar.

"Herbert we go north, strange bird we go south." He said.

"We can't decide by a coin toss." Said Camila.

“Do you have a better way ?”

“No.”

Hector threw the coin in the air, caught it and slammed it onto the back of his forearm, while still keeping it covered. He left it about twenty seconds, before revealing the image of President Herbert. It looked like they were heading north.

“North wins.” Said Hector.

“But the storm is in the north.” Said Maggie.

“You can’t go back on the result.” Said Hector. “If you do, the sacred Gods of the coin toss will turn against you. Ten years bad luck I heard.”

“He’s right..... North it is.” Said Roxy.

“Did I ever mention how easier all this would be on horseback ?” Asked Hector.

“Many times.” She replied. “Far too many times.”

Camila pulled her face, the one which looked as though she’d just discovered a bad smell. She didn’t argue though about going north. They all knew either direction could be a good or bad choice. Everyone seemed reluctant to get back in the APC, it had been a while since they’d had any exercise. Eventually they were all safely inside and Roxy headed to their right, which the map confidently had marked as north.

“Damn..... That is a bad storm.” She remarked.

“I’m glad we’re not on foot.” Said Maggie. “A bad storm pulls a lot of dust up and there’s a lot of nasty stuff in the dust.”

She never mentioned it to the others, it had only been a slight movement. The APC had a radiation detector and it momentarily flicked up from normal. There really did seem to be some nasty stuff being disturbed by the storm.

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Allison Emily Chapman would have been happy to bite lumps out of Chris Dudley, if Bradford had asked her to. It was strange that the revulsion with the consequences of her actions, had left once she’d gained control of the beast inside her. It hadn’t even worried her that her clothes were covered in blood from the guard she’d just killed. Something had changed, something in her mind had accepted what she was. Allison was sure of one thing, the beast would only come to the surface if she wanted it to.

“We can’t stay here.” Said Bradford. “Dudley has connections in the government and there might be a procedure to make sure he’s safe. For all we know half the Borongan army might be on the way.” Chris Dudley was trying to say something, but Bobby had gagged him. The problem was that Dudley was scared, had a need to please and seemed to be naturally garrulous. Which meant that most of the stuff he said was crap.

“So where are we going ?” Asked Bobby.

“You’re going back to town.” Said Bradford. “Allison and I will deal with Dudley, before going on to a rendezvous point.”

“And him....” Said Bobby, nodding at Dudley. “Is he going with you ?”

“I haven’t made up my mind yet. It depends on what he tells us.”

“At least take Tony with you.”

“No, I don’t want your people caught up in what might happen next. I’ll show you a spot where you can drop us off and we’ll go the rest of the way by foot.”

“Fine, your funeral.” Said Bobby. “I just hope Dudley cooperates, he’s a big heavy guy.”

“Don’t worry Bobby.” Said Allison. “I can keep him moving. One growl will get him running.”

They were dropped off at a crossroads with no signs, where two fairly tatty looking roads met in the middle of nowhere. Bradford waited until the vehicles were dots in the distance, before choosing a direction to walk.

"It's not that I don't trust Bobby, I just don't know his local guys." He said.

"Where are we going?" She asked.

"To a place the locals call the Devil's Footsteps, it about five miles away. It's lava from a volcanic eruption that cooled into hexagonal shapes. One of the few places on the coast where a heavy aircraft can put down."

"So we're definitely leaving? I had a few things at the hotel."

"Bobby will collect our things and settle the bill. No loose ends Allison, never leave any loose ends."

"Is he a loose end?" She asked, while shoving Dudley along in front of her.

"I'm really not sure yet.... My orders were fairly vague about that."

Dudley was gagged, but he could hear it all. Maybe Bradford was playing with him? Whatever was going to happen to him, he was keen on being cooperative. He was a big guy, probably not that used to strenuous exercise. She didn't need to push him that often though, as they trudged across some fairly barren terrain. After about two miles, the stony ground became thick scrub and then the mangroves began again as they approached the coast.

"I saw something move over there, to our right." She said.

"Yeah, I saw it too. Just ignore it, they rarely attack a group of people."

It barked at them like a dog, but had the scaly body of a crocodile. The creature was keeping hidden as best it could, running between thicker clumps of mangrove roots. Allison could feel her body wanting to react to the threat.

"Does it know they rarely attack humans?" She asked.

"Just ignore it and make sure Dudley doesn't trip over anything."

He was saying ignore it, but she noticed he now had a blaster in his right hand. Snapping jaws came next in the creature's repertoire, as it stalked them.

"It's not going away Bradford."

"Ignore it, keep walking."

The creature was obviously hungry and had no intention of going away. It was hiding less, letting her see more of its four foot long body and jaws full of wicked looking teeth. Definitely a reptile of some kind, even its eyes looked like those of a crocodile. It barked though, which was weird and disconcerting. Crocs were common in parts of San Pablo, but not ones that barked. Dudley was looking worried and trying to talk through his gag again.

"I know, it's a nasty looking thing." She said. "Bradford said we should ignore it."

Allison guessed it was going to attack, when it vanished for a minute or so. It had run ahead of them and came for her, running out from behind a fallen mangrove branch. It was still five feet away from her, when Bradford shot it twice in the head. He kicked the thing and shot it once more, before he seemed happy that the creature was definitely dead.

"What is that thing?" She asked.

"That is a Swamp Devil."

"Ahhh, now I know."

They were at the edge of the mangroves and able to smell the sea, when Bradford stopped. He removed Dudley's gag and cut off the plastic ties on his wrists.

"Run, try anything stupid and I'll shoot you. Not anywhere fatal, but somewhere where it'll really hurt."

"I need to pee Bradford.... It's been hours, I really need to go."

"Fine, just don't expect any privacy. Pee where you are and make it quick. I've an aircraft on the way."

"So you're invading New Borongan ?" She asked.

He grinned back at her, a quite attractive grin. It really was a pity that he seemed determined to be faithful to his wife.

"Only in a very minor way Allison."

"Are you taking me with you ?" Asked Dudley.

"That really does depend on the next few minutes Chris. Lie to me and there's a good chance I'll leave you here as Swamp Devil food."

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Pastor Ivor had survived and thrived by never completely trusting anyone, even his own daughter. He certainly never fully trusted anyone who worked for him, including Tobias. He'd seen too many people cut down by their own crews, important people, dead at the hands of those they trusted. He'd cultivated quite a few contacts in other organisations who were willing to pass on useful information, at a price. An independent network, some even in the president's own entourage. All unknown to his daughter, all reporting directly to him.

"Thank you for letting me know.....Yes, a phase that lasts from when they're about thirteen and ends when they're eighty.... Yes.....Sadly she's too big to put over my knee."

He put the phone down and leant back in his chair. It was the third contact telling him about his daughter engineering the death of Dimitri. Had she caused that much damage to his organisation ? Some would trust him a little less, but they were poised to take over a good chunk of Dimitri's business. Everyone relied on the illegal but essential imported meds.

"Maybe I need to send her away for a while, give her a clear message." He muttered.

He needed her though and there was no question of disposing of her. There was a meeting due in a few minutes, a meeting that would bring in a much needed business partner. No old Russian APC, parked in some out of the way car park. They were thinking big, putting the meds out through restaurants, bars, even beauty parlours. There was a fortune to be made.

"No, I can't punish her.... She's going to be the new Dimitri."

Like it or not, he'd have to let her get away with having Dimitri killed. Once the meds business was running smoothly he'd have a word or two with her, to make sure she understood the need for loyalty. He'd get Tobias to give her a few bruises, to discourage any further private vendettas. Ivor was curious about the reason for his daughter wanting Dimitri out of the way, but his curiosity could wait a while, he was a patient man. Marie came into his room, looking happy and ready to meet their new partner.

"Do I look alright ?" She asked, twirling for him.

"Perfect my wild daughter, perfect. I intend to tell him you will be running the entire operation. There can be no running off for days then, no more being my wild unreliable daughter."

"I know.... I promise not to let you down."

"I'm sure you won't."

Someone thumped on the door, a head appearing to say their three pm meeting was waiting downstairs.

"Bring him up."

He wasn't alone of course, no one important went alone to meetings. He'd brought two guards with him, the perfect number. Two showed you were wise and cautious, but too many was an insult to those you were meeting.

"Bobby sends his apologies, but he's away on urgent business." Said Little Vic.

"I quite understand... You must know my daughter."

"Yes, always a pleasure to see Marie, always."

He meant it. Even Ivor could appreciate that his daughter's business suit might look professional, but it still clung in all the right places. She'd be dealing mostly with men and her sexuality might just give her a little extra edge.

"I'd like Marie to run the meds business." He said. "I see her as the smiling face of the operation, the new Dimitri. Would you have a problem with that?"

"Not at all..... A very good choice."

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Everyone in Desperation claimed that the Badlands became more barren as you approached the centre. They'd obviously never had the guts to go there. The APC was still a long way from Base Omega and what was reputed to be the worst part of the Badlands, but the vegetation was lush. Maggie had claimed the gun turret seat to get a better view and couldn't resist giving the others a running commentary.

"There's a few birds in the trees." She yelled. "Birds in the Badlands!"

"Just keep an eye open for any rivers and canyons." Said Hector. "The last canyon took us well out of our way."

"There's a small stream in the distance."

"I see it." Said Roxy. "We'll need to stop and check how deep it is."

Distance was difficult to judge with no known landmarks. It was over an hour before Roxy stopped their home on wheels quite close to the stream. Everyone had to go and look of course, at what looked like clean water in an area that was supposed to be barren.

"Looks fine, but I wouldn't drink it." Said Cruz.

"There's a couple of boxes of steriliser tabs somewhere." Said Camila.

"They won't take out radiation or contaminants." Said Chip.

"None of that worried someone, there's a water canteen over there." Said Maggie.

Maggie wandered off to get the canteen, while Hector knelt down and scooped up a handful of water. It smelt clean, as clean as the well water in Desperation after it had been through the newly fitted filters.

"I really wouldn't even taste that." Said Roxy. "There could be all sorts of bugs and parasites in it."

"I'm not that silly, but there are plants growing next to the stream and green algae on some of the stones. If I was thirsty enough, I'd drink it."

"Surely someone must have seen.... All this." Said Cruz. "Why does everyone says it's barren out here?"

"Reputations can be difficult to change." Said Hector. "This part of San Pablo was a hell hole once, but things change and heal, even somewhere like the Badlands. No one comes here because it used to be bad, or they lie about coming here."

"We still need to be careful." Said Roxy. "The radiation counter jumped a bit during the storm we drove through."

"You never mentioned that."

"It wasn't much and I didn't want to worry everyone."

Maggie returned with a stainless steel canteen with Deoxy Research Inc, written on the side in bright red letters. She was also carrying a modern Ion blaster and a set of military dog tags.

"There are some bones if you want to look." She said. "There are few bits of a uniform, but he looks to have been dead for a while."

"Maybe not, the blaster looks fairly clean." Said Hector. "And the dust storms would take the paint off the canteen in just a few years. Let's have a look at these bones."

The remains were on the surface, open to the weather and the attention of hungry scavengers. The skull was still there, but half the rib bones had gone.

"The uniform could belong to any army." Said Roxy. "Can I see the dog tags?"

Maggie handed them to Roxy, who spat on one before rubbing her sleeve over it.

"His name was Hector Sanchez and he was a catholic. Nothing useful on these things of course, like a date of birth or an issue date. Looks new though, definitely not been lying out here since the troubles."

"Maybe he was headed where we're going." Said Maggie.

"It begins to make sense." Said Hector. "I did wonder how those creatures in the bunker survived without food. Maybe it wasn't completely abandoned."

"Yep, regular visits explains the plants growing in the lower levels." Said Roxy. "Someone has been turning the lights on, sometimes for quite a long period of time."

"We'd have noticed something, it was all so clean." Said Chip.

"We never looked at most of the levels and we entered the bunker through a service door. It explains it all, though it does imply that Base Omega is still inhabited and being used." Said Hector.

"How about this guy....." Said Cruz, touching the bones with his foot.

"Died from something we'll never know about." Said Hector. "Left behind because it was better than having a dead body in an APC..... Or he might have been lost. We'll never know that either."

"Poor Hector Sanchez." Said Maggie.

"Do we bury what's left of him?" Asked Chip.

"Might as well. I'd like someone to bury me, if they found my bones." Said Camila.

They buried him away from the river, placing his dog tags in the centre of the grave and under a heavy rock. Roxy said a few words and Hector felt it had been the right thing to do, taking a little time to bury a fellow explorer of the Badlands.

"Of course we may soon be fighting his friends." He said.

"You've got a point, Base Omega might be crawling with armed men." Said Roxy.

"We'll have to be careful." Said Cruz.

"Yes, we'll keep our distance for a while and look the place over." Said Hector.

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Bradford wasn't happy when Chris Dudley was standing up. Chris had been a squad leader, a senior member of PD489. That had been before he'd turned traitor of course and turned a blind eye to anything he'd been paid to ignore. Chris was also much heavier now and out of condition, though he might not have seen it that way. People are good at self-deception and Dudley might have fancied his chances at running away into the mangroves. Normally Bradford would have enjoyed chasing him, but he'd sent the 'come and get us' signal to Gupta.

"Sit down Chris and stay sat down." He said.

"Fine, I'll do whatever you want, tell you whatever you want."

Where to begin? He already had Marie's very thorough list of who had been involved in the property scam. Not that property scams usually fell under the jurisdiction of PD489, but there had

been the bomb in Tucker's Town. Bombs change things, they turn white collar crime into terrorism. Bradford decided to cut right through to the one really important question.

"We have a source Chris, a good one. If I killed you and left your body for the Swamp Devils, no one would care. A show trial is nice of course, but you might have some embarrassing stories to tell."

How had Chris Dudley ever become a senior guy in a clandestine part of national security ? Bradford could see terror in his eyes after a fairly gentle threat.

"What source ? They can't know as much as I do."

Bradford rattled off the list of names Marie had spoken into Camila's recorder. He decided time mattered and added something to encourage Dudley to be honest.

"Jason Cetrone is dead Chris, a loose end taken care of by person or persons unknown. And before you ask, it wasn't me or anyone from PD489. Dimitri is dead, which just might turn out to be another tidied up loose end. Another three members of your little land grab have also died. All of them tortured Chris. Would you like details of what they did to Jason ? It was bad Chris, truly dreadful."

"There's no need for this." Said Dudley. "I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"One thing Chris, just one thing I need to know. Was Otis Herbert involved in your property company in any way ?"

"No, he was never even approached. We knew things might get tricky once a few bombs went off and President Herbert would never put up with that. He likes everything to come with what he calls a wage, but terrorism ?! No way."

Bradford fired his blaster, aiming closer enough to Dudley's head to scorch his left ear.

"Convince me Chris, your life depends on convincing me. I believe I know who is tidying up loose ends and I think you know too. Why would he be doing that if his hands are clean ?"

"Because of Jason ! There will be a lot of muck being thrown about and some of it might stick to The President. The public might forgive a lot, but they'd never vote for a man linked to a bomb outrage. He's clean..... I swear it Bradford....pure as freshly fallen snow."

"You'll stick to that if I take you back to San Pablo ? No change of heart if your lawyer comes up with some bright idea for a plea bargain ?"

"I'm not stupid Bradford ! I know you can get to me in any prison. Otis had nothing to do with our group, nothing at all. That is the truth and I'll tell it anyone who asks."

Bradford had a headache from the sort of moral uncertainty he wasn't used to. Otis Herbert really wanted Dudley dead and no longer a threat. Chris was harmless though and he'd once been Bradford's boss at PD489. A useless boss who screwed up quite a few cases, but a poplar guy for all that. So simple to put a blaster hole in his head and feed the Swamp Devils.

"How badly did he hurt you Allison ?"

"Very badly and the bastard enjoyed doing it. Let me kill him Bradford, please."

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Gupta loved the way that a group of people playing cards, could instantly become a professional and well-disciplined fighting unit. The double ping had been sent by Bradford and the VTOL was uncovered and on the way in just a few minutes. There was a gentle throbbing sound as it rose into the air, a sound which hinted at massive reserves of hidden power.

"We know where their coastal missiles are located." Said the pilot. "The big problem are their mobile railgun units. They can be anywhere, but there aren't that many of them."

"What if one spots us ?"

"I have permission to engage and destroy."

Gupta hoped it didn't come to that. No one back home in San Pablo would thank them for turning the cold war with New Borongan into a hot war. Gupta knew that the mobile railgun units were few in number and usually found near the major cities. They'd deliberately waited some distance from the pickup area, just in case they were seen and a whole flotilla of Borongan warships were sent to the area.

"They're waving at us, pity we can't wave back." Said the pilot.

"The tourists think we're one of theirs." Someone said.

They flew straight over resort towns, with their tourist boats and crowded beaches. So many people were waving at what they assumed was an aircraft belonging to their own armed forces.

"With luck no one will ever know who we really are." Said Gupta.

It felt like they'd never arrive at the Devil's Footsteps and then the pilot was slowing down and heading slightly out to sea.

"I'm picking up no transmissions of any kind for miles. With your permission I'll fly straight in?"

"Yes, do that." Said Gupta. "I'm sure Bradford is eager to get picked up."

They had a perfect view of the strange shapes from the VTOL, the crystalline pattern in the rocks which had once been volcanic lava. No sign of Bradford, he was probably staying hidden until they'd landed. The pilot was good, hovering and landing the aircraft on a small target, as though it was the easiest thing in the world.

"We're down, get the door open." Said the pilot.

One of the PD489 operatives opened the door and the first face to appear was Bradford, grinning at everyone. Allison Chapman next, with Bradford helping her inside.

"Anyone else?" Asked Gupta.

"Just us..... Get us out of here pilot." Said Bradford.

"Hold onto something..... We're leaving very low and very fast." Said the pilot.

There was a whine from the VTOL's powerful motors, as it accelerated hard at a height that made the ocean waves look far too close.

"Did you find Dudley?" Asked Gupta.

"Yes and he told me everything I needed to know." Said Bradford.

"Then he had a bit of an accident." Said Allison.

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Hector Pérez thought the dust storm had saved all their lives, though it was a while before he had time to sit and mull it over. Lots of factors played a part in keeping them alive that night. Roxy should have been using the powerful lighting array on the roof to find her way, but some sort of 6th or 7th sense had caused her to use just the low beams. Then there was the quietness of the APC on flat even terrain. Sure it could growl a bit when accelerating or climbing over rough ground, but on the flat it quietly purred like a well fed cat.

"Stop ! I just saw lights up ahead." Said Maggie.

Maggie should have been asleep, but she was still sat up in the weapon turret, looking at the stars. Stars which she couldn't see anyway because a dust storm was beginning to grow in strength.

"Are you sure?" Asked Roxy. "I don't see anything."

"I know what I saw Roxy. There are people on the other side of that hill, the one we're heading towards."

Roxy had doubted Maggie in the past, but not that night. The APC came to a halt, engine off and lights switched off. Apart from the sound of the growing wind, everything was dark and silent.

"What do you see now Mags?" Asked Hector.

“Three lights, one bright the others quite dull. Moving about near the top of the hill.”

“I can see a glow now too.” Said Roxy. “If only this dust storm would blow itself out.”

“The storm probably saved us from walking into an ambush.” Said Camila.

“You think it’s an ambush ?” Asked Hector. “No one knows we were coming this way.”

“Ambush, regular patrol or just a guard post. Call it what you want Hector, it’s probably bad news.”

So tempting to ask Maggie to get down so that he could have a look, but he knew Maggie still had a few open wounds when it came to trust issues.

“Do they look agitated Mags ?” He asked. “Are the lights moving about a lot ?”

“No, they haven’t changed. Still moving slowly, like people walking about.”

Damn, he really had hoped that dealing with the dust storms and bugs would be the worst parts of the journey to Base Omega. Now it looked like they’d have enemy outposts to deal with on the way.

“We’ll need to deal with them, whoever they are.” He said. “If it’s some harmless scavengers we just say hello and leave them alone. If they aren’t harmless.....”

“Not in this storm, we should wait for morning.” Said Camila.

“Crap ! The wind and dust are a blessing.” Said Roxy. “We should go now.”

Hector had good reasons not to take sides. Roxy was sleeping with him and Camila was his link to a new life one day and hopefully a few rewards. They hadn’t given each other any bruises yet, though it had to come. There wasn’t room for two leaders in such a small group. He’d had a quiet word with Cruz one evening, about separating them if the inevitable fight became too bloody.

“This is my mission and my APC.” Said Camila.

“Then let’s step outside of your APC.” Yelled Roxy.

The moment had come, the tussle to see who was the boss of their mission. Hector nodded at Cruz and hoped they’d be able to part the two women, before someone used a blade. Roxy had her hand on the door handle, when Maggie began to yell at them.

“No ! We mustn’t fight each other..... The enemy is out there. Stop it ! Please, please stop it !”

“Can I add another please to that ?” Asked Hector.

“Me too.” Said Chip.

Maggie was crying and climbing down from the turret seat, while Chip moved to hug her as she came down. Roxy and Camila were still glaring at one another, but no one looked likely to throw the first punch.

“Oh Christ !” Snapped Camila. “Let’s get out there then and get it over with. Ten to one we’ll just find a few scavengers from one of the settlements.”

“Not here, not this far out into the Badlands.” Said Roxy.

It was Cruz who noticed the radiation counter was showing more than just a blip.

“Out of the green and into the yellow.” He said. “Wear masks, you don’t want to be breathing in whatever shit is mixed in with the dust.”

The hired APC came with simple face masks, a pile of a few dozen in the same cabinet as the first aid supplies. Outside it was dark, the yellow glow of a half moon just about visible through the constantly worsening dust storm. Hector could see the lights now though, what looked like hand held lamps of some kind.

“No lamps, we know the ground is flat.” He yelled above the wind. “Follow me and walk carefully.”

The ground was flat, but Hector nearly ran his shins into a small rock. After a while his eyes did that wonderful trick of adjusting to the gloom. There was no colour or detail, but the moonlight was just enough to see the way. He went round the side of the small hill, looking back occasionally to make sure the others were with him. As they neared the top of the hill he brought his newly acquired

assault rifle out from under his coat. Blasters were fine, but people weren't used to the bark of an assault rifle anymore and usually found it intimidating. He held the weapon up and the others understood and did the same. By pointing and waving he got them to spread out a little.

There was a slight depression on the top of the hill, making it the ideal spot for a guard post. If they'd arrived on a storm free day or in the daylight, they'd have been in serious trouble. A large calibre weapon was fixed onto a tripod and aiming the way they'd have arrived.

"Drop your weapons !" Yelled Hector. "We've got you completely surrounded."

It was the sort of thing they said in the old movies he liked and Hector had been waiting most of his life for the right moment to say it. None of the four men in the camp had seen them come over the top of the hill and only two of them were carrying weapons. Hector hoped the rest would be easy and end in a bloodless outcome.

"Don't even think about it !" Cruz shouted at the guy in the truck.

Four men in uniform living out of the back of a truck with a canvas cover. Hector almost felt sorry for them. Living like that had to be hell when a storm kicked off. The guy in the truck was heating something up on a stove and he'd reached for a blaster.

"That's it, nice and slowly..... We're not here to hurt anyone." Shouted Roxy.

The wind was picking up, but the three men carrying lamps had obviously heard her. They placed their oil lamps on the ground and their blasters.

"Ok, now we can have a civilised conversation." Yelled Camila.

Hector realised it wasn't going to be easy, bloodless or civilised; when the guy in the truck raised his blaster and began to fire.

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