

Bradford II – Badlands

Chapter 18 – The Ranch

“Bradford quite liked Bob in Desperation. There was an immediate rapport, the way one curmudgeon instantly recognises another. Bob had proudly shown them the town, what there was of it. The most prized thing in Desperation seemed to be the new water filters and the tank of crystal clean water they fed.”

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Yasmine had tried to avoid Gupta for months after they'd broken up. There was that look in his eyes, a puppy someone had kicked before throwing it out in the rain. Now he was in a relationship again, quite a serious one according to the office gossip. It made it easier for them to communicate and they were on their way to being friends again.

“How long until we get to the settlement ?” She asked him.

“Desperation, the locals call it Desperation. About another fifteen minutes and I'm hoping Bradford doesn't decided to add someone else to our number ?”

“Why ? Are we running heavy ?”

“Yes and more than just a little over the limits. Twenty eight of us including the pilot and we've got the heavy APC in the lower cargo bay. We'll be alright though, as long as we don't run into trouble, or Bradford finds a few more people he thinks we need to take with us.”

“Now you mention it..... The aircraft has seemed a little sluggish.” She said.

“Just hope we don't run into any serious ground to air defences.”

It was the Badlands, where a working blaster was just about the pinnacle of available weapons.

Yasmine wasn't too concerned about the VTOL being a little heavy and slow to turn. She left Gupta and checked her armour wasn't pinching anywhere and that her blaster was fully charged.

“Can you check my armour ?” Asked Chet. “Everyone else is giving me the stink eye.”

“I get that too, we're interlopers, almost stowaways to them.”

They chuckled as she checked his armour was correctly fitted and double checked his blaster. Then there was Allison, who was getting the cold shoulder from Sequel's team.

“Don't let it get to you.” Said Chet. “Think of us as the Three Musketeers.”

“Who ?” Asked Allison.

“Ignore him, he won't read a book unless it's three hundred years old.” Said Yasmine.

“But..... It's a classic.”

Yasmine checked Allison's armour, while Chet looked over her blaster. It was all routine but far from being useless. Check your own kit for too long without anyone else looking it over and there is a tendency to get careless, to assume everything is working fine. People had died from that kind of thinking. Bradford banged the wall to get everyone's attention.

“We're about to land near the settlement called Desperation. We'll be going in slowly on foot, giving the locals plenty of time to see us. These people are not our enemy and you will not fire on them.... Is that clear ?”

“What if they fire first ?” Asked Sequel.

“You duck and try not to get hit.” Said Bradford.

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Hector sat in the passenger seat in the front of the APC and tried to think about anything other than the pain in the left side of his head. For some reason every bump and jolt made the pain worse, causing him to grip the dashboard and moan.

“Crap Hector..... Take a few more painkillers.” Said Roxy.

“They make me too drowsy.”

“So go to sleep, we’ve miles of rough creek bed to drive over.”

“He’s got a bad feeling about where we’re going.” Said Camila. “And to be honest, so have I.”

Camila said a quick prayer in old world Spanish, which made him even more apprehensive. Tempting to use pain killers and sedatives to give himself a few hours of pain free sleep, but he just kept getting a bad feeling about the dried up creek.

“There are a few shots of local anaesthetic in the first aid kit.” Said Maggie.

“We might need those Mags..... In case we need to sew someone up or something.” He said.

Hector held onto the dashboard and tried to brace himself for the worst bumps and downright spine jarring moments. It was almost a relief when he seemed to be seeing things.

“Pain induced hallucinations.” He muttered. “I’m seeing giant spiders.”

Roxy hit the brakes as the APC was climbing over a steep piece of ground. Hector groaned as their mobile home away from home came to a juddering halt.

“Not an hallucination, I see it too.” Said Roxy.

“That’s sad, madness might have been better than the pain.”

“I see it too, like one of the things in the Deoxy brochure.” Said Chip.

Everyone wanted to cram into the front to see the strange spider like creature. It had far more legs than a spider, probably over twenty. Still some distance away, yet it still looked menacing and dangerous. The long legs gave it height, twice the height of a man. A furry spider body with a scorpion front end, the pincers snapping in their direction. Hector had forgotten Cruz was up in the turret, until he asked the obvious question.

“Hey guys.....Should I kill it ?”

“Yeah, it’ll give us a chance to get a good look at it.” Said Camila.

It didn’t die easily. Cruz fired three bursts from the 50 calibre to bring it down and some of its legs were still twitching. Roxy drove the APC closer, but no one seemed keen on being the first to go outside.

“Stay in the turret Cruz, just in case some of its friends come along.” Said Hector.

Hector went out first, scanning the nearby bushes, his assault rifle up and ready. Nothing came out to avenge the fallen creature, as they all clustered around it. Half of the right side of its body had been destroyed, yet its legs still twitched, its pincers slowly opened and closed.

“I don’t think it’s quite dead yet.” Said Maggie.

“Insects are different to us, tougher.” Said Roxy. “Like when you stamp on a roach, but it still survives long enough to run under the refrigerator.”

“Tough fucking bastards.” Added Camila.

She fired a few rounds into the large arachnid like monster and its legs still didn’t stop moving.

“It must have come from Base Omega, the ranch place.” Said Maggie. “Elis said they were just raiders though, raiders who got lucky. They’re not scientists.”

Hector kicked one of the twitching legs and it didn’t react. It just carried on with the same rhythmic twitching.

“Reflex action I think, it’s dead.” He said. “As for Vincent and his raiders..... They probably did what we did and opened the wrong door. A huge amount of stored food and tech is far too tempting to ignore.”

“They’re probably still opening doors and letting things out.” Said Chip.

“They’ll breed.” Said Maggie. “Imagine a few hundred attacking Desperation.”

“Imagine a few thousand attacking San Pablo.” Said Camila.

Cruz fired three times as another spider creature came out of the scrub on the other side of the creek. Even in death it tried to move, its legs clawing at the ground.

“We have to destroy Omega Bunker, or seal it up forever.” Said Hector.

“Everyone back in the APC, we’ve a long way to go before nightfall.” Said Roxy.

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Bradford quite liked Bob in Desperation. There was an immediate rapport, the way one curmudgeon instantly recognises another. Bob had proudly shown them the town, what there was of it. The most prized thing in Desperation seemed to be the new water filters and the tank of crystal clean water they fed.

“Hector is an asshole, lower than a snake’s belly.” Said Bob. “I’ll give him one thing though; he knows how to fix stuff.... Smell the water, just smell it.”

Bradford knew the best way to get Bob to cooperate was to go along with his foibles. He sniffed the water in the grubby metal cup, before drinking every last drop.

“That is good water Bob, better than we have in San Pablo.” He said.

“Told you ! I’m even starting to lose the gut ache I’ve had since..... It seems like forever.”

Every time he’d asked Bob about directions to Pile o’ Bones, the conversation had moved on to the next part of town they had to see, the next treasure Desperation was proud of. Bradford smiled at Gupta and knew it was time to be firm with Bob, or find someone else who knew the way.

“We can leave some supplies here Bob, but it’s time for you to give my pilot a few directions on how to get to Pile o’ Bones.”

“You haven’t seen the old bunker yet, or the dead thing that looks like a huge scorpion.”

“Directions Bob, it really is time we left. You must have given directions to Camila when she was here. Tell my pilot what you told her.”

“I told her and she promised to take me with them.” Said Bob. “The mean bitch let me collect my things together and then drove off without me.”

It all began to make sense. Gupta was grinning at the old guy, he seemed to like Bob too.

“Can we fit him in somewhere Gupta ?” Asked Bradford. “He doesn’t look that heavy.”

“Not that much of him at all, as long as he doesn’t bring too much with him.” Said Gupta.

“Just me, a rifle and a small back pack. I’ll tell your pilot the route right away.... That woman had gang marking on her APC, but you guys..... You’re official, from the fucking government. I trust you guys.”

“Trust or not, don’t give us the scenic route Bob.” Said Bradford. “If I think you’re taking us by the tourist route, I just might drop you off from a thousand feet up.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll show your pilot the quick way.”

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Cruz had been driving as the brief twilight period signalled that their journey for that day was over. The APC had been driven right up against a rocky overhang, their best way of trying to hide it from night patrols, if there were any. Maggie felt the APC was a little claustrophobic during the day, though she could cope with it. Night was different though, the feeling of being shut in became

unbearable. Claiming the turret seat helped, but she rarely got more than two or three hours of sleep. Unlike Chip her night vision was just about perfect. She watched the approaching string of lights until she was certain they were held by people. Waking Roxy meant waking Hector too, as they seemed wrapped around each other.

"Sorry.... You need to see this."

"Having trouble sleeping Mags?" Asked Hector.

"Yes.... This is important though.... People are out there."

"Oh, what has she seen?" Asked Roxy.

"I'll have a look while you dress."

She liked the way they were together, he even kissed Roxy on the cheek before clambering up into the turret. He was only dressed in his boxer shorts, which Maggie wasn't that fond of.

"Wow your eyes are good Mags." He said. "If everyone has a light, there must be two dozen of them, at least. Where did they come from?"

"From the north, I thought they'd go past quite close to us. They turned west though and are about as close as they're likely to get."

"What did she see?" Asked Roxy.

Maggie hated the time grown-ups took to wake up and begin to make sense. Luckily Hector seemed happy to tell her about the people carrying lights.

"There are people Roxy, coming from the north and heading west."

"We should go and have a look." Said Roxy.

More delays as Hector insisted on putting some foot powder in his socks.

"I picked up foot rot in jail.... Nasty stuff."

Roxy took ages to find clean panties and it was a miracle the ruckus hadn't woken up the others.

Eventually they were outside the APC, with a moon bright enough to see by. Roxy made them wait until their eyes adjusted to the moonlight.

"No lights and no talking once we see them." Said Roxy. "We're just being nosey tonight, no interaction with whoever we find, not even a quick howdy."

There was enough light to see by, enough to stop any of them from falling down a hole or walking into a boulder, but walking quietly meant walking slowly. Luckily the people they'd come to look at weren't being quiet. There was the sound of children talking, long before they were close enough to see them. Animal noises too, a rare thing out in the Badlands. Maggie leant in close to Roxy.

"It sounds like a whole town on the move."

"Shush Maggie."

The creek wasn't completely dried up. A small stream ran down it coming from the north, before heading off west. The people had animals to water and were following the stream. A fallen tree gave them the perfect hiding spot to watch the travellers go by.

Only about one in ten of the adults had lamps, there truly did seem to be an entire town on the move. Noisy children, bellowing cattle, there seemed little chance of them spotting the watchers behind the fallen tree. Ominously there were wounded among them, people with blood covered bandages. Some were too badly injured to walk and were being carried in waggons, pulled by what Maggie thought might be oxen. She'd never seen such creatures before. Roxy didn't move until the people and their livestock had vanished in among the bushes to the west.

"We'll talk when we get back, the others might be awake."

They weren't, which was a bit of a relief. Maggie didn't want more sleepy people insisting on hearing about everything they'd seen.

“There were a lot of injured people.” Said Hector. “Something has caused them to abandon their settlement, something violent by the look of it.”

“I’ve never seen animas like that before..... Were those oxen ?” Asked Maggie.

“No idea, I’ve never seen them before either.... It looks like things were better in the north than they were in the southern Badlands.” Said Roxy.

“They were better.” Said Hector. “You don’t move your entire population in the middle of the night unless something nasty is on your tail.”

“Maybe the spider creatures went there.” Said Maggie.

“Perhaps, there did seem to be a lot of people who’d been bandaged up.” Said Roxy.

“Who was bandaged up ?” Asked Camila.

Maggie sighed and climbed back up into the turret seat. Roxy and Hector could tell the others about the travellers heading west.

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Allison Chapman had wondered why they’d added Bob to the already cramped main hold of the VTOL. It seemed illogical to bring one of the oldest inhabitants of Desperation with them, even if he did claim to be a sharp shooter who never missed. Actually Bob claimed to be a lot of things, though he never did mention the skill which turned out to be the most use. Bob was obviously known in Pile o’ Bones and well liked.

“Barricades and everyone armed, even the kids.” Said Sequel. “We should leave or it’ll probably be a blood bath.”

“Nonsense, I can see Muriel, right there at the front.” Said Bob. “She runs the place really, ever since the headman caught the sickness.... She knows me.”

Allison expected Bob to be shot as he calmly walked towards a wall of blasters and a few people armed with old weapons that fired bullets. He survived though and spent a few minutes talking to Muriel, while pointing at the line of PD489 operatives.

“Damn, the old guy did it.” Said Yasmine.

Muriel had waved them forward and the barricades had been moved. Bob was obviously trusted, his opinions respected. The PD489 operatives were allowed to wander about town fully armed and were treated like visiting relatives. There had been the gift of a few crates of supplies, but it was obvious that Bob had more than paid off his airfare to Pile o’ Bones. Bradford had left it to Gupta and the pilot to discuss best routes north with Muriel. It was general gossip in the settlement that Camila was heading north to find another sealed up military bunker.

Allison found herself alone with Bradford, sat at a table in the large communal kitchen. Only later did it cross her mind that Bradford had engineered a private moment with her.

“What do you think of Pile o’ Bones ?” He asked her.

“Beautiful and idyllic.... Unless you get a burst appendix or a serious infection. There are advantages to living in the sweatbox we know as San Pablo City. I’d like to come back one day though and see more of the place.”

“Has Gillian talked to you about the future ?” He asked. “About her research into your augmentations.”

“She mentioned using graphene grafts on my vertebra, but I don’t want to end up looking like a robot.”

“It’s doing damage to your bones Allison, every time you chase an enemy out of a first floor window, or move at a speed you just weren’t designed for. Use the beast inside you to save your life if you have to, otherwise..... Use your skills with a blaster and learn to duck.”

There was that grin again, the one that made her wish he wasn't so keen on being faithful to Amoe. Allison knew he was right, there were lower back pains after she'd trained with Sequel. Pains between her shoulder blades too, after jumping from the Chris Dudley's first floor window. She knew she wasn't doing her body any good.

"How bad is it?" She asked.

"Bad enough to put you in a wheelchair for the rest of your life."

"Thank you for telling me. You could have let me run at full power, using me until I was no longer of any use to you or PD489."

Oh, that grin again. She'd already made up her mind to seduce Sequel at the first opportunity, or maybe Chet. She wasn't used to being rejected and it seemed an unusually long time since she'd been hot and sweaty with anyone.

"Hey, if I'm in trouble, forget everything I just said." Said Bradford. "You come in at full strength and rescue me."

"Do you think Gillian can fix me?"

"If anyone can, she can.... But the guy who designed my alterations is dead, most of his secrets gone with him. You should really think about only being a super person on high days and holidays."

Allison was beginning to understand the politics and traditions of the Badlands. After lining up behind barricades, the good folk of Pile o' Bones insisted on throwing a bit of feast in their honour. Mostly tinned meat with a few vegetables, but it was the best they had. Muriel even hugged her, as though she was a first cousin at the very least. She'd had to ask the question of course, even though she was sure there was a local taboo against it.

"Why is the settlement called Pile o' Bones?" Asked Allison.

There was a great deal of laughter, before Muriel gave her the traditional answer, which may or may not have been the truth. Not that the truth ever mattered when it came to traditions.

"A group of settlers wandered this way, scavenging for food and tech." Said Muriel. "They found a huge pile of bones near the stream and they were so curious about it, that they decided to stay here for a while."

"And we're still here." Someone shouted.

It was all hugs and friendship until Sequel had an argument with Bob, who seemed to want to come with them. Most of the PD489 operatives were already onboard, the engines turning, getting up to speed.

"I can be useful, I never miss." Yelled Bob. "You'll need me, I taught Roxy how to shoot and follow a trail."

"You're too old....And we've no room for you." Said Sequel.

They were both yelling above the noise of the engines and the inhabitants of Pile o' Bones were beginning to look a lot less friendly.

"Fucking government!" Shouted Bob. "You're supposed to be the good guys."

Allison had already had her doubts about Bob. For a marksman who never missed, his ancient rifle seemed quite grubby and didn't look to have been used for a while. Not that she was about to accuse the town hero of being a fraud.

"I'd love to take you Bob, we could do with a marksman on this trip." Said Bradford. "What if the scorpion creatures arrive here in force though? I hate to lose you, but Pile o' Bones needs you more than we do."

"Well.... Now that you put it that way.... I'll stay here." Said Bob.

It was a solution which pleased everyone, Muriel even kissed Bradford on the cheek as the VTOL door was being closed. It took Allison a while to realise that the Bob situation had been just another example of Badlands tradition and settlement politics.

"Bob is from Desperation, but it's good to have a second home, once you've seen a few too many lean times in the Badlands." Bradford told her later. "Bob can now get two cooked meals a day in Pile o' Bones, without it being seen as charity. He'll be forever known as the guy who passed on having a great adventure to stay and guard the town."

"Do you think Muriel knows it was just a bit of play acting?" She asked.

"Very good play acting Allison, Bob has earned his meals.... But yes, of course she knew."

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Camila took a turn in the turret seat, while Maggie gently spread some sort of healing ointment over the side of Hector's face. No one knew what the gloop was; it was in the first aid kit that came with the hired APC.

"Thanks Mags, that really does help with the pain." Said Hector.

"Oh, it's loosening the crispy bits..... But your skin is healing underneath." Said Maggie.

Camila had to look away. She'd seen some dreadful things in her life; she'd caused quite a few of them. There was something about the bits of burnt skin falling from the side of Hector's head.

"I've got to hand it to you Maggie; you're tougher than I thought." She said.

Cruz was driving and she trusted him to be careful and observant. She had a higher position though and the chair was mounted inside a self-levelling turret. Cruz might see the world wobbling about with every rut in the ground, but her view was always level and true.

"Slow right down Cruz, I think..... Not really sure what I'm seeing." She said.

"What is it? Shall I stop?" He asked.

"Just slow down for now. I'd appreciate a second opinion Roxy."

Roxy went up into the turret and she too began to make the kind of sounds a confused person makes. After a lot of tutting and muttering, Roxy gave her opinion on the wreckage in the distance.

"I know this is going to sound crazy, but I think it's Flight 2207. There's definitely..... Yes, that is the left side engine from a modern New Nations dirigible."

"Didn't that go down over the ocean?" Asked Cruz.

"No one was sure, there were rumours about it crashing in the Badlands." Said Hector. "Not that anyone was in a hurry to come here and look for it. Easier to say it was lost over the ocean, though most flights now avoid the centre of the Badlands."

"I've never heard any of this." Said Maggie. "What was Flight 2207?"

"A rare thing, a modern aircraft lost with no survivors." Said Hector. "So rare that school children are taught about it in modern history."

Roxy came down and Camila took her place in the turret. Still too far away to be certain, but the large curved structure did look like the engine from an aircraft.

"My son, my Mateo has been learning about Flight 2207." She said. "A quarter of a century since it crashed, yet he now talks of little else. Over four hundred passengers and crew, vanishing without trace. It's no wonder there are wild rumours and conspiracy theories."

"I do love a good conspiracy theory." Said Chip.

"Bullshit, there were just a lot of bad storms that year." Said Roxy.

"Where was it going to?" Asked Maggie.

"I know that one; it was carrying rich Tourists to New Vegas, "Said Cruz, "now known as the Far West Republic, or FWR to frequent visitors. A nation we're still technically at war with. Lots of rich people on that flight, we should definitely search the wreck."

"Looting the dead ! That's disgusting."

"No worse than taking food and tech from a sealed up bunker." Said Cruz. "The dead don't need their things anymore."

"No, this is different." Snapped Maggie.

"Not so different Mags." Said Camila. "He's right, we should look over the wreck, even if it isn't Flight 2207. There will be clues left to where the aircraft came from and who was on it."

"I'm not taking anything." Said Maggie.

"Ow easy, that's my ear."

"Sorry Hector."

Twenty five years and the Badlands had inflicted their worst on the wreck, though there was no mistaking it was the remains of a modern passenger aircraft. Only two had ever been lost and one of those was accounted for. It had to be the lost Flight 2207.

"Use the engine for cover, get in there right up against it." Said Camila.

The engine was huge, three times the size of their APC. Cruz managed to get them partly underneath the vast engine cover, making them almost impossible to see.

"Good parking Cruz." Said Roxy. "There's still a few hours of daylight, we should begin searching the wreck."

It didn't take them long to be ready to go outside, though Camila didn't seem enthusiastic to explore the famous lost aircraft.

"I have a feeling and they're rarely wrong." She said. "Just remember that there were deadly predators out here before someone let the giant spiders out of Base Omega. Be careful, very careful."

"We will be.... No splitting up, we'll explore together." Said Roxy.

There was little wind and just the right amount of late afternoon sunshine to make it good weather for exploring. The solid parts of the fuselage were made from aluminium, the moving engine parts from stainless steel. For a wreck that had been there for a quarter of a century, there was very little sign of corrosion.

"Holes that might have been from blaster fire or crashing into the ground." Said Hector. "You'd need to be an expert to tell the difference and we're not experts."

"Has anyone flown on one of these ?" Asked Maggie. "Where is the bridge, cockpit... or whatever ?"

"I fly, though not as often as I'd like." Said Camila. "The Captain has quarters where the important documents are kept."

The design had been changed over the last twenty five years, more emergency doors, more signs pointing to safety equipment that no one would ever have a chance to read, much less understand. The old wrecked craft was almost a breath of fresh air, with its uncluttered corridors and an almost cavalier attitude to safety signage.

"There's some water damage, but most places look.... Like it crashed a week ago." Said Roxy.

"I don't think the basic layout changed." Said Camila. "The Captain's Quarters are at the front, so he can see where they're going."

The front of the accommodation areas had suffered more than the rear; it was obviously where the two hundred foot long craft had struck the ground. Holes had let in the rain and enough sunlight for plants to get a start. Camila had to climb over or around quite a few well established vines. Finding

where the Captain had called home wasn't hard; there was gold lettering on the door. The door was ajar, revealing a room which seemed to have taken the brunt of the crash. The floor was broken the aluminium alloy struts pushed up at weird angles.

"The safe for passenger's valuables will be in there too, though we'll never be able to open it."

Camila was wrong; the crash had jolted the safe with enough force to pop open the door. There was a splash of gold on the floor, where the contents of the safe had been thrown out by the sheer force of the crash.

"We must be the first to find this wreck." Said Cruz. "No one would have left all this."

"Don't go crazy; just take what you can easily carry." Said Camila.

A door gave access to a bathroom which wouldn't have looked out of place in an expensive San Pablo hotel. Another door showed them a small kitchen, complete with two ovens and a dining table.

"The Captain lived well." Said Chip.

The final door along the corridor opened to reveal a ruined bedroom. The ceiling had gone, allowing the elements to get to everything. The bed was pushed over at an angle, a skeleton trapped underneath it.

"Unlikely to be the Captain." Said Camila. "He'd have been busy trying to reassure the passengers."

"Unless the crash was sudden and at night." Said Chip.

Chip did seem to love his conspiracy theories. Flight 2207 had been a wreck for too long though, any obvious signs of sabotage would have long gone. Maggie was down on her knees, looking under the upended bed.

"I can see another body." She said. "If this is the dead Captain, he probably went out with a smile on his face."

Camila could see the Captain's desk, but nature always obeys certain rules. If something is important to you in a wreck, or a disaster, it will be the one place to be ruined. The desk was made out of an old dark wood and it was right under a hole in the fuselage. For more than two decades the rain had run over the desk, encouraging fungus and algae to claim the wood as their own.

"Fuck, everything inside must be ruined." Said Camila.

"What were you hoping to find?" Asked Chip.

"A cargo manifest, maybe a passenger list with a few signatures and company logos. Something I can take back and give to the authorities. All the dead will have had families and they need to know where they died."

"Do you know the right people to give that stuff to?" Asked Maggie.

"Oh yes, she knows the right people Mags." Said Hector. "Let me help you get the desk open Camila, something might have survived."

Cruz disturbed them by pulling a ruined blanket off the bed, before running back towards the safe.

"I said only as much as you can carry Cruz." Camila yelled.

"Hasn't he seen any old movies? Carry too much and it'll kill you." Said Hector.

"..... But there's so much jewellery.." Cruz shouted. "Enough for us all to be rich."

"You collect it.... You can damn well carry it." She shouted back.

Camila ignored Cruz and his obsession with the gold and jewels. Hector helped her to rip off the roll down top on the desk. Inside it was worse than she'd imagined, the rain had been getting in there for years.

"This pile of mush was once the freight manifest." She said.

Something ran across her fingers as she threw the rotting paper on what was left of the bedroom floor.

"That looks more promising." Said Hector.

"The passenger list, the manifest was covering it, protecting it."

The paper was damp and there was some mildew, but it was still legible. Several pages on company embossed paper. Some pages had hand written notes next to the names, some signed with 'Captain' written after the signature.

"Oh look Hector....Mr and Mrs Abbot were on their way to a second honeymoon in New Vegas. The Captain approved two bottles of free champagne."

"..... There are diamonds..... Bags full of diamonds." Cruz was yelling.

"I'll be out in a moment." She yelled back.

She did notice that Maggie and Chip went to see what Cruz had found. It seemed the young were more interested on diamonds than old pieces of paper. Not that she blamed them. Camila carefully folded the passenger list and put it in her jacket pocket.

"Come on Hector..... Diamonds I don't mind carrying."

Maggie already had a diamond in her hand when they arrived, a large sparkling gemstone.

"Look Camila..... Is it any good?"

"Might be fake, they make some pretty good fakes now." Said Roxy.

Camila took the diamond and twirled it about in the light coming from a hole in the wall. She knew diamonds, used them as currency to pay for drugs from the New Nations. In a world where no one trusted banks abroad, diamonds were the next best thing to a wire transfer. Camila handed the stone back to Maggie.

"A nice stone already cut and polished." She said. "That one stone is worth enough to make the rest of your life very comfortable Mags."

"There are bags full of them..... All as good." Said Cruz.

"Then it looks like we're all going to be a lot richer than we were yesterday." Said Roxy.

"So stop shoving old watches into that blanket Cruz." Said Camila.

"Look I know they're fakes, but fake Rolex from that period are classics, even without the solid gold cases." Said Cruz.

"Hector is right..... Try to carry all that weight and it'll get you killed." Said Maggie.

"Yeah..... If you must take a few, put two on each wrist.... I'll wear a couple for you." Said Roxy.

Cruz was too eager to agree to the plan, where everyone was going to wear a fake Rolex or two.

They worked, which seemed a miracle after being left in the wreck for so long. Self-winders, they all soon had the luxury of two or three working watches each. All to be eventually given back to Cruz of course.

"Oh, I knew he'd given in too easy." Mumbled Camila.

No one knew what the time was, despite the overabundance of dodgy timepieces. One of Camila's watches said 3am, the other 4am. Whatever the truth, Cruz had just gone out of the APC with a large bag and one of their oil lamps. It didn't take a genius to know that he was going back for the other watches, gold bracelets and jewellery.

"Stupid, stupid..... Stupid."

"Do you need a hand finding him?"

Maggie, wide awake and looking straight at her. Company would have been nice, but Cruz had a wicked side when it came to money and bling.

"I'd better do this on my own Mags."

Crazy to use a lamp, the yellow glow would be visible for miles and her lamp was adding to the problem. She followed him and he never looked back once, or checked on his surroundings. She followed him into the room with the safe, watching him scoop gold bracelets into the bag.

“Do you know how crazy this is Cruz ?” She asked. “The diamonds are worth more than you could spend in several lifetimes.”

“I heard you behind me..... My family never had anything, always hungry. That’s not going to happen to me Camila.”

She heard something, the sound of children playing. A sound so crazy that it made her forget Cruz and his hoard of knockoff watches.

“Did you hear that ?”

“If this is a trick Camila !”

“Don’t be stupid..... Listen.”

He followed as she walked across the ruined bedroom, turning her lamp out as she reached the hole where the wall had been. Cruz turned off his lamp, as they both saw the long line of lights and heard the children shouting at their friends. To them the journey out of danger would be a huge adventure, though their parents would know the truth.

“More going south, more settlers running away from something.” She said. “These look poorer than the others we saw, no carts or livestock.”

“A lot look to be injured.... What are they running away from ?”

“You know Cruz, we both know... They’re running from whatever those idiots at The Ranch have let out.”

The gold was temporarily forgotten as they waited for the line of refugees to move south and then to the west. Camila lit her lamp and they were back at the APC well before dawn.

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