

Bradford II – Badlands

Chapter 19 – Rescue

“He had to undo the top two buttons on his shirt and pull the collar to one side. The scar was old, but still red and ragged. He’d nearly died from the dreadful wound, which had come very close to ripping open his windpipe.”

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Had Bradford known it, the PD489 VTOL had landed not that far from where Cruz had killed the two spider like creatures. A flat topped hill, there were quite a few of them in that part of the Badlands. The steep sides of the hill were a good natural defence, but he’d still made half his operatives walk regular patrols around the top of the hill. It was the people, the refugees who made him nervous. “They’re running away from something Gupta, something nasty.” He said.

Bradford handed his night vision glasses to Gupta. Allison had wandered off to explore, after ignoring all his comments about it being a silly thing to do. He was used to her ways now and short of putting her in handcuffs; there was no way to stop her doing as she pleased.

“More of them all the time, coming from the north and heading west.” Said Gupta. “Might be a natural disaster in the north, like a flood or something. I doubt it though; something nasty has probably driven them out of their homes.”

They’d seen the long lines of people from the air; the exodus from the north was going on night and day. Travelling at night required lights though, making it easier to see the mass movement of whole settlements.

“What do I always say about coincidences Gupta ?”

“There is no such thing as a coincidence.”

“Exactly Gupta, there are no coincidences. Hector finds a sealed bunker full of monsters. Camila hires an APC and heads north to find a mysterious Base Omega. The next thing we have is a mass movement of scared people heading south. I wouldn’t mind betting a month’s pay that it’s all connected in some way.”

Yasmine joined them, dressed in full body armour and carrying an Ion blaster. No one seemed to be sleeping, everyone felt that something strange was happening in the northern Badlands.

“Their APC won’t be travelling fast.” She said. “With luck we’ll find them tomorrow.”

“I hope it’s a rescue and not a recovery.” Said Gupta.

“Camila is pretty tough and she has Cruz and Hector with her.” Said Bradford. “Though I’ve no idea why she decided to take the two teenagers with her.”

“What is this Roxy like ?” Asked Yasmine. “They seem to respect her in Desperation.”

“You have to be tough to be the leader of a Badlands settlement.” Said Bradford.

There was blaster fire from not that far away. No sound, just the flash of a small hand blaster, the sort Allison liked to use.

“Shall I issue an alert ?” Asked Gupta.

“Allison wouldn’t be using her blaster unless there was no alternative. Wake everyone up Gupta.”

Their comms equipment worked locally, Gupta’s alert would soon have everyone up and ready to fight. Long range they couldn’t contact anyone and were still very much on their own.

“She’s moving this way.” Said Yasmine.

The blaster flashes were closer, much closer; Allison was obviously running as she fired. Bradford reached for his blaster and realised he was unarmed.

"Give me your weapon Gupta and fall back to the VTOL."

"Oh, I was hoping to....."

"Fall back; you're more use in the VTOL. Get the outside lights turned up to full and activate the railguns for use against whatever is chasing Allison up the hill."

"Yes Bradford."

Gupta handed him a reasonably powerful plasma blaster. It wasn't Bradford's weapon of choice, but aim it right and it would get the job done. Everyone was waking up and forming a line to his left and right. For the first time since leaving PD489 headquarters, Bradford wished he had two hundred operatives with him, rather than just two dozen.

"Bring out the....."

He realised Gupta was no longer there and used his communicator.

"Get someone into the APC Gupta and get it here, quickly."

Was he panicking over what might be just Allison running away from a few feral creatures of the Badlands? Bradford knew the people from settlements in the north weren't cowards and there was another clear sign that Allison was being chased by something dangerous. One of 'them' was there, one of his watchers. An elderly woman this time, standing less than twenty feet away.

"..... tough, keep firing until they die.... Aim between the pincers...."

He'd never seen Allison out of breath before, but she could barely talk as she came over the top of the hill. She fired once, before collapsing on the ground next to him.

"What's chasing you?" He asked.

"You'll see..... Had to run, too many to kill."

The lights on the VTOL had to be uncovered, their pods extended. They kicked in with daylight brightness, dazzling Bradford for a few seconds. He heard the comforting sound of the two external railguns locking into place and charging up. Nothing would get past those, the VTOL was safe.

"Christ Bradford, there's hundreds of them." Said Yasmine.

In his mind he'd pictured a dozen of the scorpion creatures, two dozen at most. The tall spiders filled the edge of the hillside. They were too big and heavy to walk silently, but there was no roar, no shriek, no sound at all to intimidate an enemy.

"Fire at them, aim between the pincers!" He yelled.

It took three hits with his borrowed blaster to bring the closest brute down and its legs were still twitching, trying to move. Twenty legs and they were tall, standing at least fifteen feet high.

Bradford heard a scream to his left and ignored it. Patching up the wounded and counting the dead would come later and only if they'd killed the giant arachnids or driven them off.

Allison was up on her feet fairly quickly, using her blaster to good effect. She was better than him with hand held blasters. It wasn't nice to admit that to himself, but the evidence couldn't be ignored. She was bringing down the huge arachnids twice as fast as he was.

"Gupta, where is that APC? We badly need its extra firepower."

"I think those things got the driver, they've come up the other side of the hill too. The pilot can cover you with the nearside railgun. There are risks though Bradford, railguns aren't that precise."

There was quite a risk, the weapons spewed out aluminium slugs at hypersonic speed. Great for clearing the massed ranks of an attacking enemy, but not so good at picking off the bad guys in amongst the good guys. The twenty legged monsters were close, too damn close.

"Tell him to use the railgun Gupta, I'll take responsibility."

"I'll go and get the APC." Said Allison.

Bradford really wanted to tell her to stay put, but they badly needed the APC for its turret weapons. It would also be a useful refuge if the bugs did overrun the hilltop.

"Alright, just be careful Allison."

Bradford killed one of the spiders which was trying to bite Yasmine. He was beginning to notice that their legs and pincers always kept moving after they'd been brought down. It was probably just a post death reflex, rather than a sign that the creatures were indestructible. Bradford looked towards the edge of the hill and saw another line of spiders arrive.

"Gupta..... Where is that railgun ?"

"They're here, the spiders..... We'll need to use the offside railgun to keep them off us."

"Do it, just give me what firepower you can spare."

Could the spiders penetrate the hull of the VTOL ? Bradford doubted it, but they'd be able to destroy the external sensors and control surfaces. Whatever happened, losing the VTOL was unthinkable.

The damn thing was probably worth more than the entire PD489 annual operating budget.

"About fucking time."

Yasmine yelled as the railgun fire reduced the approaching arachnids to body parts. There would be casualties, PD489 operatives killed or wounded by the furious output from the nearside railgun.

There was no alternative though, if any of them wanted to live to see the sun coming up again. She was still there of course, watching him as he killed another long legged monster. His watcher, the elderly lady who seemed fearless and indestructible. One of the spiders walked right past her, seemingly oblivious to her presence. Maybe he was crazy after all ?

"Bradford..... We've got a problem."

"What is it Gupta ?"

"One of them..... No two....Right inside the....."

There was the sound of an explosion from the direction of the VTOL and a bright flash of light.

Bradford found himself in the dark, his eyes trying to adjust to seeing the hilltop in just starlight and a few hand held flashlights.

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Amoe could see why Bradford had a bit of a crush on Tamara. She was pretty and smiled a lot and seemed genuinely concerned about her wellbeing. Amoe was beginning to develop a slight girl crush on Tamara, so she could hardly blame Bradford.

"Are you in any pain now ?" Asked Tamara.

"No, the sharp pain went away quite quickly."

"Are you alright to sit for a while ? Gillian won't keep you waiting long."

"I'm fine Tamara, honestly. I feel a bit guilty now for bothering Gillian."

There was that concerned look and a hand on her shoulder. If the girl was faking it, she deserved a New Nations Oscar.

"Pain can't be ignored Mrs Scott."

"Amoe, please call me Amoe."

"Would you like coffee Amoe ? It's the real stuff."

"Oh yes."

The problems had started as soon as she'd woken up that morning. She'd ached more than usual, though the sharp pain hadn't kicked in until she'd been eating breakfast. Her call to Gillian McBride had been put straight through.

"You're early Amoe, but we always knew this wasn't a straight forward pregnancy." Said Gillian.

"I can't be in labour, it's far too soon."

"Get in a cab Amoe and come in, the room is ready. If it's a false alarm we'll get you taken home again. Have your waters broken?"

"I'm not sure..... There was a pain when I was in the shower. You must think I'm stupid."

"No Amoe, you're just a first time mother. Read all the books and magazines, but they don't prepare you for the real thing. Call that cab and get here."

The pains began again as she waited for Tamara to return with coffee. Tamara insisted on putting her into a wheelchair for the trip up in the elevator to the new 'Amoe maternity room,' right next door to the main laboratory.

"You'll be fine, we're far better equipped than most civilian hospitals." Said Tamara.

"My own doctor wanted to be here for the birth. If it is the birth?"

"He's been called and is on the way here."

Amoe realised she probably wasn't going home, when a Lab Tech with cold hands began to take blood samples.

"Just routine Mrs Scott." He assured her.

She was beginning to realise why Bradford yelled at people who called him Mr Scott.

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Camila took a turn at driving the APC that morning. It wasn't fun trying to steer around the wreck of Flight 2207. The wreckage had formed a wet and sheltered oasis for the local plant life, encouraging vines and bushes to thrive and block their path. Twice she'd had to stop, while the others used anything with a sharp edge to clear the way. By the time they reached the third obstruction, the others had decided to begin a peaceful revolution. It began with Maggie of all people.

"You could help us Camilla." She said. "There's nothing for you to drive until the way through is cleared."

She was right of course, but sitting and watching the others sweat had become mildly addictive.

Camila was also the official leader, it was her APC. Her tone of voice was an attempt at superiority and wounded pride.

"Someone needs to stay in the APC." She said. "Ready to use the turret gun in an emergency."

"I could do that." Said Maggie. "I'm a good shot, never been known to miss."

"It is sort of your turn to get grubby and bitten by bugs Camila." Said Hector.

"I'll even lend you my machete." Said Roxy.

When Cruz started giving her the stink eye, she knew there was no avoiding at least half an hour of hard work. Unpleasant too, some of the small spiders in the vines could give a nasty bite.

"Fine, fine.....Maggie can go up into the turret seat and keep watch." She said.

"You'll enjoy it once you start." Said Maggie.

Camila hadn't enjoyed it, not one little bit. Forty minutes of hard sweltering work and they still had a few rocks to shove out of the way. Cruz noticed it first, the reason why someone needed to always be ready to use the 50 calibre in the turret.

"Damn, that's just about the biggest I've ever seen." Said Hector. "They can be deadly if they're hungry."

"Shall I shoot it? Tell me someone, can I kill it?" Maggie was yelling.

"No, if it was hungry it would have attacked by now." Roxy shouted back. "It's a bit of a breath of fresh air to see a natural Badlands predator."

"A thing that size could swallow a man whole, without even chewing him a little first." Said Cruz.

"Huge, what is it?" Asked Camila. "I've heard of Anacondas in the Badlands, but never thought they'd be that big. I'd say a fifty or sixty foot long snake is far from natural."

"Evolution at work." Yelled Maggie.

"Evolution takes countless generations." Said Camila. "Adaptation is quicker, it's why kids kept indoors can end up with short sighted vision. The snakes have simply adapted to conditions in the Badlands."

Hector was grinning at her, while the others were literally gawping at her, open mouthed.

"Gimme a break." She said. "I have a kid in school who loves all that stuff."

A few more rocks to shift and the way was open to the north, following the dried up creek again.

There was a new valley cutting across the creek though, a deep valley they needed to cross.

"There, it looks a bit rough going," said Hector, "but we can get down into the valley and up the other side."

"Yeah, if we were feral cats maybe, not in an APC." Said Roxy.

Hector was pointing at a gradient of about one in ten, not too much of a struggle for the APC. There were boulders though and some light scree in places.

"The APC will manage that." She said. "We'll need someone walking in front, to make sure we don't snag on anything."

There was that look of rebellion again.

"Oh, you people.... Fine, I probably haven't been doing my fair share." She snapped. "Roxy can drive and I'll walk down in front of the APC."

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At first the world around him seemed very dark. Bradford hunched down, trying to present as small a target as possible until his eyes adjusted to the starlight. He saw movement and fired, aiming his blaster almost straight into the ground. The flare from the weapon was enough to show him the movement was one of the huge arachnids. He fired three times in the direction he remembered seeing a head with pincers and was rewarded by hearing the brute fall over.

"Anyone got a spare flashlight?" He yelled.

"We can share."

Yasmine, standing beside him, blood covering much of her left leg. Talking about her wound and getting it looked at would come after the monster spiders had been driven off. From the light of her flashlight he caught a glimpse of a body on the ground, a body which looked to have been partially eaten. To his right he could see blaster fire, probably from Sequel and his operatives.

"Gupta, are you alright?"

Nothing.

"Gupta, is the VTOL in one piece?"

Nothing.

"I think those things took out the VTOL." Said Yasmine.

"Sequel and his team are still fighting." Said Bradford. "And Allison went for the APC. We're not finished yet Yasmine, not by a long way."

The next few minutes were confusing, memories of battles always are. There was the constant need to remember skills learned in training, while trying not to think about the risk of the death. The spider creatures seemed to have been disoriented by the sudden darkness, but they were attacking again, more of them appearing over the top of the hill.

"Crap Bradford, there are still hundreds of them."

"Just kill the closest Yasmine, always the closest."

They took it in turns to have the handicap of holding the flashlight. Desperation gave them an edge, as they filled the area in front of them with the blasted remains of twenty legged monsters. That time had come for Bradford, the event which settled the question about his mental health. Was he sane and the watchers real, or was it all a psychotic episode brought on by the stress of battle ?

“Damn, that’s Chet !” Yelled Yasmine. “The fucking thing is eating Chet.”

Bradford should have stayed where he was, with Yasmine, protecting each other, sharing a flashlight. Instead he walked to their right to get a better aim at the spider feeding on what was left of Chet. He fired, but tripped over something before the spider was dead. Yasmine fired and hit the brute, yet it was still coming for him as he tried to get up. There was the slight glow of dawn arriving in the east, though Bradford wondered if he’d live to see another.

“It’s here, the APC.” Shouted Yasmine. “We’ll be alright now.”

There was light everywhere again. Not as bright as the floods on the VTOL, but still more than enough light to see the monster running at him. Bradford heard the APC’s weapons begin to fire, he saw spiders being ripped apart. Not his one though, not the one bent on killing him.

“No !”

He heard her, there was no doubt about it. The little old lady, his watcher was pointing at the spider. No, not pointing, aiming a small hand held weapon, aiming it at the creature. The creature died and the watcher was gone. The arachnid didn’t simply die though, it became nothing but a pile of black ash. Bradford was up on his feet, helping Yasmine to fire at the twenty legged monsters.

“Did you..... Did you see that Yasmine ?”

“Yes, you were lucky. Someone got it with a phosphorous round, probably one of Sequels team.”

That was the obvious conclusion, but he knew better. Bradford didn’t even entertain the idea that he might have been hallucinating. He’d heard his watcher and seen her kill the brute that was trying to kill him. The watchers were real and he was sane, end of story.

“There seems to be fewer of them.” Said Yasmine.

She was right and just in time, the blood on her leg was beginning to look quite fresh. Later the consensus was that the APC had driven them away, with its withering rate of fire. Allison was a genuine hero now, loved by everyone, including Sequel. It might have been the APC that scared off the spiders, or they realised there was easier food to be had elsewhere.

“You’ve opened up the hole in your leg Yasmine.” He said. “I’d tell you to see the medic, but.....You are the medic.”

“I’ll be alright.... A jab of local anaesthetic and I’ll be able to stitch myself up.”

“And a good belt of Vodka Yasmine, externally to disinfect and internally to take the edge off.”

Bradford walked over to the bloody remains of Chet and covered them with his jacket. There was a lot of tidying up to be done, burying the dead, treating the wounded and trying to get their very expensive VTOL back into the air.

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Bobby Laszlo thoughts were drifting; they always did when he felt relaxed. There had been quite a few stressful months and it was if his mind was finally able to day dream a little. He hadn’t been sure about going into business with Pastor Ivor and he’d been very wary of Marie, his wild daughter. Her reputation was of being wild to the point of being feral, which had worried him quite a bit. It had worked out though; the pastor and his daughter seemed to have reinvented themselves. The crazy religious guy in the old cathedral had proven to be an asset, as had Marie. He sat in Pastor Ivor’s comfortable lounge, sipping a fine New World brandy, while nibbling at a plate of buffet style food.

Only Little Vic grinning at him signalled that Marie had said something which he ought to have listened to.

"I'm sorry Marie, good food, good company. I was drifting a little. What did you ask?"

"Was there ever a Mrs Laszlo?"

No wonder Little Vic was grinning, his disastrous marriages were almost the stuff of legends. He was surprised she hadn't heard some of the stories, or she had and was just trying to start a conversation.

"Oh there have been three Mrs Laszlos, though I'm now single. The first was when I was far too young to marry, so was she. We made the mistake of thinking lust and great sex was love. We had nothing in common, nothing at all. I knew we were heading for a divorce when she stopped throwing crockery at me and picked up an iron skillet.... See this?"

He pulled back his eyebrow a little, showing her the nasty looking scar it hid.

"Oh Bobby, did she do that?"

"Yes, she became quite skilled at using that skillet as a weapon. People think my various scars are from being a bit of a ruffian. The sad truth is that most of them are a result of being a disappointment to the women in my life."

"I find it hard to believe you'd disappoint any woman."

She had her hand on his knee and was definitely flirting with him. Or teasing him, in his experience teasing and flirting were often intertwined.

"I know Marie, I know.... I try so hard. As for wife number two....."

"Clever to number them Bobby, names would probably lead to getting too attached."

Teasing, definitely more teasing than flirting, though her hand was still squeezing his knee. If her father hadn't been in the room, he'd have felt inclined to squeeze hers.

"It's too painful, all the memories of my past failures.... Not using their names helps numb the pain Marie."

"Hmmm, I see." She said, giving a look which said she didn't believe him.

"Anyway, wife two was later in my life, when I'd grown up enough to marry for love rather than lust. Sadly I still hadn't learned to recognise a psychopath. Look at this....."

He had to undo the top two buttons on his shirt and pull the collar to one side. The scar was old, but still red and ragged. He'd nearly died from the dreadful wound, which had come very close to ripping open his windpipe.

"Oh Bobby, you're teasing me.... No wife would ever do that."

"Marie, I might embellish the truth a little, but this scar was punishment for being a little too friendly with a cocktail waitress at the Blue Giraffe. Wife number two had intended the kitchen knife to enter the back of my head, but I moved in my sleep."

Her hand left his knee and traced out the scar, across his neck and over his collar bone.

"That is quite a wound Bobby, how close were you to dying?"

"Very close..... If she hadn't called for medical help....."

"Wife two did this and then called for help? You seem to bring out the best and worst in your women Bobby Laszlo."

Her fingers rested for a moment on his chest, a look came into her eyes... No, she'd only end up as yet another disappointed woman and that might ruin their contraband meds business.

"That is nothing Marie.... Wait until I tell you about wife number three."

He never did get to show her the bullet wound, one his men was coughing to gain his attention. Little Vic took the note and handed it to him.

'Bradford wife picked up by cab.
Talked about having a baby.
Dropped off at PD489 HQ.'

People talked about Bobby's strange and unusual methods of learning about matters that even Maria's mass surveillance missed. There was nothing that strange about it, he offered a bounty for the information he was interested in. He had a running bounty on anything happening at Bradford's address and cabbies were always looking to earn a few extra Herberts. For anyone else, such activities were likely to lead to interrogation in the lower levels of the PD489 building, before disappearing, never to be seen again. Everyone knew that Bobby and Bradford were friends though. "I am so sorry." He said. "Someone I know, a friend... Looks to be about to give birth."

"You must mean Amoe Scott ?" Asked Pastor Ivor.

Of course he'd know that Amoe was close to her due date, the pastor and Bradford had been friends for years.

"You must go of course." Said Marie. "Bradford is a good man, please give his wife my regards."

A strange and rather old fashioned choice of words from Marie and spoken with sincerity. Had Bradford succumbed to Marie's charms ? No, he was too much in love with Amoe to risk a fling with the pastor's daughter.

"I must go, but next time it will be an evening at my suite in The Dunes Hotel." Said Bobby.

"Tell Amoe, if there's anything she needs....." Said Pastor Ivor.

Bobby actually ran down the stairs from the pastor's rooms, before running through the old cathedral. Amoe was early, though only by a week or two. Still, early meant a potential problem. His driver opened the car door for him.

"Get us to the PD489 building, as fast as you can." Said Bobby.

Allison Emily Chapman had helped Yasmine to clean and stitch the hole in her leg, before following Bradford around. So far he hadn't questioned why she was shadowing him, which was just as well, as she didn't really know why. It was just that after losing five of his operatives, including Chet... His own people seemed so angry and aggressive. It had started earlier, an argument with Sequel that became more than a little heated. The dead had already been put in body bags and loaded into the VTOL.

"We take our dead home, it's what we do." Sequel had said. "Their families expect it and won't forgive you for burying their loved ones in the Badlands."

Allison had been the hero of the group for all of an hour. Now she was obviously backing up Bradford and getting the stink eye from Sequel again.

"My duty is to save the living Sequel." Said Bradford. "Your orders are to get some graves dug and bury our dead."

Sequel wasn't moving. No one was fondling weapons or anything, but it was clearly a case of insubordination.

"To be honest Bradford, I'm not telling anyone to start digging graves, I doubt if they'd do it if I asked. We always take everyone home, even if it's in a body bag. Look at this place ! There's no dignity in being buried here."

Allison just stood and waited to see how things played out. She was fairly certain she could break Sequel's neck before he even managed to raise his blaster. Bradford simply sighed, a long tired sigh.

"I will explain my orders just this once, but never again. Is that understood?"

Sequel nodded, though that obviously wasn't enough for Bradford.

"Say it, say you understand."

"Yes Bradford, I understand."

"Refuse to obey another order and you can look for a new job." Said Bradford. "It looks like we might have the VTOL back soon, something about everything having backups to backups... Anyway they think we'll be on our way fairly soon."

"That is good news." Said Sequel.

"Yes, though the VTOL has no cold storage. Put the bodies into the hold and it means heading for home. Our mission is to find Hector and the other. They're probably not far ahead of us and in danger from the brutes who attacked us last night. They have two young people with them Sequel, one of them a girl. We bury the dead and carry on with the mission."

There was hesitation as Sequel wanted to argue again. He didn't though.

"I'll get the graves dug."

"Good."

Allison didn't say a word to Bradford, until they were well away from Sequel and his team.

"Just for a moment, I thought he might attack you."

"No Allison, I had the same kind of fights with his brother. Both solid and reliable soldiers, who get the job done. Perhaps a bit too fond of some warrior's code that has never really existed, but good operatives. He was just pushing to see how far his piece of elastic would stretch."

"Really? It felt quite dangerous."

"No, he always was going to bury the dead. Now his men know he did his best to take them home for a proper burial. I'll get dirty looks for a while, but I can live with that."

They were back at the VTOL, where Gupta was getting instructions on how to make repairs from the pilot. Gupta had come out of the previous night's fight with just a few bruises. The pilot was a different matter, his legs had received serious electrical burns. Everyone was making all the right supportive noises, but the pilot would need a pair of prosthetic limbs.

"How are the repairs coming along?" Asked Bradford. "Can you give me a timescale yet?"

"Things are better than they looked earlier." Said the Pilot. "As I mentioned, all the electrical systems have multiple backups. Some of the engine components need replacing, but we have spares. I'd say.... Hmm.... We can be on our way in two hours."

"Something I'm not looking forward to." Said Gupta.

Gupta was the stand in pilot, it was impossible to fly the VTOL without legs that worked. The second replacement pilot was Bradford, who admitted to being a little rusty. No matter who flew the aircraft, no one was expecting the flight to be as smooth as it had been.

"Two hours, that's brilliant." Said Bradford. "After seeing the explosion, I thought we'd be driving home in the APC."

"It looked bad, but electrical explosions always do." Said the pilot. "Our toroidal motors run at a fairly high amperage. One of the spiders got a leg inside an engine cover and..... Well, boom. Luckily most of the fireworks were on the outside of the aircraft, the giant bug being fried by a few thousand amps. Sadly I wasn't so lucky, but I'm sure PD489 will fit me with a set of state of the art metal legs. Give us two hours and you'll have a working aircraft again."

They buried the dead and Yasmine cried when a few words were spoken over Chet. The APC was loaded back into the hold and the pilot was accurate with his timescale. Two hours after talking to him, the VTOL rose into the air and headed north again.

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Feeling a lack of control can lead to stress, which can give rise to anxiety. It was a well-known phenomenon and Hector really had made the most of opportunities for education in various jails. He understood the symptoms and knew how corrosive stress could be. They stopped at night, but no one really slept at night anymore. It was seeing the giant spider like creatures and the constant flow of refugees. No wonder everyone seemed to have become insomniacs. Only whoever was driving the APC was alert during the day, the rest of them lounged about and took naps. Hector would have probably been napping too, if his ear hadn't been giving him so much discomfort.

"Damn Roxy, I know the irritation is because it's healing." He said. "It's driving me nuts though."

"Try to get some sleep Hector. I'll let you know if I see where the track starts."

Maybe it was just his ear hurting causing him to be grouchy, but he no longer trusted Roxy to be alert and focused. Maggie was up in the turret as usual, supposedly looking for the track which would take them in the direction of The Ranch. He tapped Maggie's foot and she jumped.

"I knew you were asleep. We can't miss the turning, or we're screwed."

"Sorry Hector, I haven't been sleeping too well."

"None of us have Mags. Stay alert now, stay focused."

"I will..... Sorry."

They had the route written down, instructions given to them by Elis Dowds. He'd turned on them, nearly killing Chip during some crazy death or glory attempted escape. His directions to The Ranch might well have been nonsense, or worse, a trap. The few lines of notes on flimsy paper were all they had though. Hector sat in the front of the APC and peered through the grubby and cracked windscreen. He was fairly certain that Camila was going to lose her security deposit on what had been a shiny new APC.

"I see them, the two bug mounds that look like sentries." Yelled Maggie.

"I don't see them." Said Roxy.

"You will, when we turn left to follow the creek."

Roxy was still avoiding swerving about by hitting bushes head on. She misjudged one; it was obviously more of a small tree than a bush. There was a loud clang as the front of the APC bit into solid wood. The bush didn't stand a chance, its leaves adding to the junk on the windscreen.

"Hey, watch the road." Yelled Maggie.

Everyone in the back was cursing, but Cruz came off worst, coming right out of his seat to land heavily on the floor.

"Christ..... Are we under attack ?" He shouted.

Roxy merely grinned.

"They needed waking up anyway." She said.

The two bug mounds were there and they really did look like giant sentries. Twenty feet tall, maybe more, like two immense guardians.

"I can't see the track yet." Said Roxy.

"I can, it's not much of a track." Said Maggie. "Probably why it isn't guarded."

"If we can believe what that bastard Elis told us." Said Cruz, while still trying to extricate himself from a couple of blankets.

It wasn't the main way to get to The Ranch, or so the now dead enemy soldier had told them. It was a back way in, which would take them to a hill overlooking The Ranch and the bunker behind. They all knew everything sounded a bit too convenient.

"I see the turning." Said Roxy.

Hector woke everyone up as gently as he could, they all needed to be armed and ready to fight. There was that aroma as everyone climbed out of their blankets. It was the perfume of people who needed to see a proper shower again, or at least soak in a river for a while.

“Come on everyone, up and at em.” He said. “We all know that Elis was a lying bastard. This might not turn out to be an unguarded track after all.”

At least the ground either side of the track wasn’t covered in thick vegetation. Just a light scrub, which gave no cover for any enemy ambush or guard post. Sadly the scrub became a thickly wooded area after about three or four miles.

“Stop Roxy, I saw someone cross the track.” Yelled Maggie.

“Someone, a person.... Or was it an animal ?” Asked Camila.

“I know what I saw, it was a person in dark clothing.”

Just about everyone was trying to peer through the windscreen, looking at the track as it meandered through the trees.

“We believe you Maggie.” Said Roxy.

“Good place for an ambush.” Said Cruz.

“Don’t go crazy Maggie.” Sais Camila. “Fire two rounds at where you saw them go to.”

Maggie spaced the shots, two bangs followed by the clangs as the heavy calibre weapon rattled about on its mounts. Hector was pretty sure they’d upset someone, when at least four blasters began firing in their direction.

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