

## Bradford II – Badlands

### Chapter 23 – Strange Allies

**“Maggie stood up, the assault rifle against her shoulder, aimed at Zeke. Her first thought wasn’t about dying, it was the realisation that her weapon had probably been manufactured a hundred years before she’d been born.”**

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Bradford wasn’t running flat out, but he was setting a good fast pace, Allison running beside him. The plan wasn’t a plan really, just a determination to reach the lowest level of the bunker and deal with what was down there. One set of stairs had been easy to find, but they’d run quite some distance before seeing a sign for the next. The paint was flaky and the ‘r’ was missing, but the sign had once said ‘Stairs,’ and there was an arrow pointing along a wide, straight corridor.

“This place is huge.” He said.

“The bunker we found had a central corridor a mile and a half long.” Said Hector.

“Are we going to run all the way ?” Asked Roxy.

Bradford ignored her, his head full of what might be waiting for them in the bottom level of the bunker, the place his watchers had called hell. He also ignored the way Hector had spoken, the difficulty he’d had getting enough air to talk properly. Bradford wasn’t callous, he was just focused totally on one thing, the hell they were heading for. He might have run his people until they’d collapsed, if it hadn’t been for the two creatures attacking them.

Allison claimed not to remember being trained to use an Ion blaster, but she saw the two brutes and fired twice, before anyone else had managed to react to them.

“Two of them, like bears.....By the door ahead.” Yelled Roxy.

Roxy was fast, but the creatures were probably already dead by the time her blaster fire ripped into them. Allison had aimed well, a head shot on each, with a second shot to the part of the torso where the heart was likely to be.

“They didn’t roar, the damn things were quietly waiting to ambush us.” Said Sequel.

“Yes, well done Allison, you probably saved at least one of us from a mauling.” Said Bradford.

“There is a tradition with these brutes. Cover me while I do it.” Said Hector.

They all kept their weapons aimed at the dead creatures, while Hector walked forward and kicked them. Two hard kicks a piece and no one told him that he was wasting his time. Allison may have vaporised a good portion of their heads, but everyone breathed easier when they didn’t react to Hector’s kicks.

“I hereby appoint Hector as official monster kicker.” Said Bradford.

They grouped around the creatures, everyone but Allison and him was still breathing hard. Bradford didn’t think a leader should apologise that often, but he understood how demanding the run must have been to those without his augmentations.

“Sorry, the pace was a bit crazy.” He said. “Hector and Roxy can be in the lead for the next stretch. When they get tired we’ll have a rest break and change who’s in front.”

“Thanks Bradford.” Said Camilla. “I was developing muscle burn in my legs.”

Bradford used his foot to turn one of the bear like creatures onto its back. The face was so human, as were the hands. Its fur was light coloured, its jaws definitely ursine.

“The eyes.....That face, it’s like looking at a man.” Said Bradford. “Were the others you found like this ?”

“No, this one is more human looking and larger.” Said Hector.

“These seem cleverer too.” Said Roxy. “I don’t think the ones we found were capable of waiting in ambush.”

“Probably some new horror Deoxy Research were working on.” Muttered Hector.

It wasn’t an ideal place to rest, but Bradford let everyone kick the dead beasts and take a break for at least fifteen minutes.

“Time to move everyone.” He said. “Hector and Roxy in the front to set the pace, we’ll stop again when they’re feeling too tired to set a decent pace.”

There were no more creatures waiting to attack them, though there was the occasional stench of something feral in the air coming from a few darkened rooms. The emergency lights left a lot of shadows and it was easy to imagine things waiting to pounce. Twice they heard the sound of gunfire from above, guns firing bullets. A long way off and up towards the upper levels of the bunker, the gunfire might mean a lot of things, none of them good.

“The stairs..... I see them just ahead.” Shouted Roxy.

She and Hector didn’t seem keen on descending the stairs. Bradford understood when he saw what was down there. There had been a battle between Vincent’s fighters and the creatures and it wasn’t obvious who had won.

“Some of those remains are human.” Said Hector. “Vincent left his dead where they fell.”

“I wonder if the inhabitants of The Ranch know he left their dead loved ones to rot down here ?” Asked Camila.

Bradford went first, carefully stepping around the remains of humans and monsters, which littered the stairs. He noticed that it was impossible to avoid bumping into a huge skeleton of something twice the size of a man.

“Christ !..... It had tiny wings.” Said Sequel. “What were those fuckers making down here ?”

“Can you rig up something on the remains of this brute Camila ?” Asked Bradford. “Nothing huge, just a bang to warn us we’ve got someone on our tail.”

“Yes, easy..... It’ll take me two minutes.”

It took her five minutes, but he decided not to mention it. Hector and Roxy were still in front setting the pace, as they ran on, looking for the next set of stairs leading down.

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Vincent firmly believed the enemy were going after the tech and weapons store on floor G, though he wasn’t certain. There were times when he genuinely saw things happen in his mind, but they turned out to be false. Even his own family had ceased believing in his visions; he could see it in their eyes. Maybe some of his visions were hallucinations, delusions brought on by some kind of mental miasma ? Vincent was no longer sure what he believed.

“I thought floor G was completely cleared of the abominations.” He said.

It was a statement rather than a question, when he gave orders, he expected them to be carried out. He expected Ernesto to answer, before realising his faithful bodyguard and friend was now dead. There was a stench on floor G, the strong odour of the dreadful creatures who seemed to breed faster than they could be killed. It was Stephan who answered him, the man who often behaved more like a dutiful son than Luke.

“There are constant patrols on this level Reverend, but they breed lower down and are constantly appearing in places that were once thought safe. Every time we unseal a door, the infestation gets worse.”

“We need the tech down there Stephan, the tech is our future.”

Vincent wasn't running, though he was keeping up a good steady pace. He prided himself on being fit for his age. Floor G was much dirtier than he remembered, there were even traces of animal spoor in places, creature shit as his men called it. None of his fighters were firing at shadows yet, though they all looked nervous.

“Once this business is over we must clear the lower levels again, destroy the abominations once and for all.”

A few of his fighters cheered, but most didn't. The last attempt to clear the lower levels had failed, so many deaths that the numbers had to be hidden. As far as the good folk of The Ranch were concerned, over fifty of their kin were now involved in clearing farmland to the north.

“Yes, of course Reverend.” Said Stephan.

Within ten minutes someone fired at something they claimed to have seen lurking in the shadows. There was no sign of any body, though the man was adamant that he'd seen something flinch when he'd fired.

“I'm not imagining it.....I saw it run away. Huge thing, twice my size.”

Vincent put it down to nervousness approaching hysteria, he'd seen it before. It was almost a relief when two of his men found a real target to shoot their blasters at. A target covered in thick black fur, it screeched as it died.

“If only the face wasn't so human.” Said Stephan.

So many strange and different abominations had come up from below, but the creature lying on the floor was familiar. A beast that looked mostly like a bear, apart from that disturbing face. It was dead, but it shouldn't have been there, floor G was supposed to be safe.

“I'll get it moved and incinerated.” Said Stephan.

“No, we've more important things to do Stephan.”

Vincent took the lead again, increasing the pace a little. He found the sound comforting, as he listened to his fighter's boots pounding behind him.

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Luke only had a few men with him and he knew the bunker well, he'd cleared it of monsters several times in the past. That had been before his father had insisted on unsealing doors and going deeper. Now he'd have needed a thousand trained fighters to clear the bunker and The Ranch only had a small fraction of that number. There was a downside to commanding a small and fast moving force, he couldn't afford to lose anyone.

“They're heading for the south stairs.” Said Jason. “If we use the west stairs we can get ahead of them.”

Their enemy were leaving an easy trail, their boots scuffing the dirt at every corner. They were moving fast though, using the closer stairs was a good opportunity to catch them. Luke was hesitating though, his instinct was still to chase the enemy.

“They may not be heading down to the lower levels.” He said. “We'll take another set of closer stairs, a corridor they don't know about..... And just maybe we'll lose them altogether.”

“Or we follow them and never catch them.” Said Jason. “These people are running, maybe moving faster than us.”

Luke liked Jason, his friend since they'd both been tiny infants. Unlike his father, Luke encouraged his men to question his ideas, though only to a point. Leading a military force was never going to be a matter of consensus.

"I see your point Jason, but I want to chase the enemy, not get involved in some race to the lower levels that might be nonsense anyway. We will carry on following their tracks."

As with Bradford and his people, Luke was feeling fatigued by the time they reached the two brutes Bradford's fighters had killed. The dead monsters weren't alone, at least a dozen Scorpioids were feeding on their flesh. Luke saw his men lift their blasters.

"No !" He yelled. "You'll give away our position, the enemy may be close enough to hear blaster fire. The foul brutes are busy feeding and likely to ignore us."

They sneaked past the feeding insects and were ignored, though his men weren't happy about leaving the creatures alive. Luke wasn't surprised to see the human remains on the stairs, though they did remind him of several nasty arguments with his father.

"These are our people father, we need to give them a proper burial, their families need to know they're dead."

"No ! Tell anyone and I will no longer consider you my heir. I'll adopt Stephan as my successor."

Not the first such threat from his father, or the last. The truth was that Stephan didn't agree with his father's decision any more than he did. Stephan was just good at pretending he did.

Luck was on Luke's side that day; he reached the bottom of the stairs without setting off Camila's little surprise. A man at the back of the group set off her small bang and it killed him. Just a small charge, but it propelled a bone fragment like a bullet, piercing the fighter's chest and heart. Damn ! They'd given away their position and lost an experienced fighter.

"We carry on." He ordered. "Later we'll return and make sure he has a decent burial."

Like his father, he was finding it easier to lie the more he did it. Luke knew he had no intention of returning by the same route.

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Yasmine used their one and only pair of night vision glasses to look at the heads looking over the town wall. It was to be their last attack, dawn was beginning to leave a slight glow in the east. The inhabitants of The Ranch weren't stupid; they'd learned the tactics of their tormenters.

"They have snipers." She said. "Waiting for us to attack and move further along the wall, just like we've done all night."

"We could forget about another attack and vanish into the woods." Said Cruz.

It was so tempting to agree with him, they'd already done far more damage than Bradford had expected. They'd set out to be a nuisance and most of the fires they'd started had been put out. Not one though, they'd set something ablaze that was still sending flames and smoke right up into the clouds.

"A grenade probably hit their methane plant." Gupta had suggested. "You know..... Pig shit generating nice clean gas."

She hadn't known and it sounded disgusting, but it did account for the fire that showed no signs of being put out. They'd done a lot of damage, but she still wanted to do more.

"How many grenades do you have ?" She asked Gupta.

"Five, three incendiary and two high explosive."

It was too many to waste by taking home with them and her blaster was still showing a sixty percent charge. There was another orchard behind them with a hill about half a mile away, a nice solid hill with limestone boulders around it. Half a mile was quite a run in the dark, but it wasn't impossible.

"I promised Bradford we'd do our best," she said, "to make sure no one in The Ranch felt inclined to go and see how things were going in the bunker. I'll use the Long John to fire the last few grenades, while you all run through the orchard."

Yasmine knew she had a reputation for being a bit of a bitch, silence and open rebellion wasn't something she'd expected.

"No, it's my weapon." Said Gupta. "I fire it and you give covering fire."

"But your back."

"I'm staying Yasmine."

"He stays, I stay." Added Cruz.

"We all run or we all stay." Said one of the PD489 operatives.

"Fine, we'll attack one last time." Said Yasmine. "The enemy will think we're going further along the wall, but we'll run through the orchard and take cover behind the hill. Once our friends in The Ranch have stopped shooting at us, we'll go looking for Bradford."

"What hill?" Asked Cruz.

"Just follow me, I'll be the one praying and screaming at Gupta not to fall over."

She'd already taken the Long John from Gupta. She gave it back to him and hoped she hadn't made a decision destined to kill them all.

"We've done this lots of times people." She said. "Let's get it done."

Yasmine aimed her blaster at the wall and set it for continuous fire. It would give her position away, but the enemy knew where they were hiding anyway. A small rocky outcrop was their only protection and soon they'd be running away from that. She began strafing the top of the wall when she heard the Long John fire a grenade. She used so much energy on the wooden walls, that they were on fire by the time Gupta fired his last high explosive grenade.

"That's it..... I'm out of ammo." He yelled.

"Ok, we're leaving..... Follow me!" She shouted.

The enemy were fooled, which kept them alive for those first vital few seconds. The soldiers on the wall fired so many energy weapons, that the ground to her right looked as though it was boiling.

Yasmine still let Gupta run in front of her, while willing him to run just that little bit faster.

"Run, run everyone." She shouted.

No looking back, if anyone was hit there was no thought of going back for them. The enemy were using grenades themselves and old fashioned bullets. Energy weapons mostly of course. A tree to her right burst into flames, but the enemy still seemed confused about their position. A quarter of a mile into the orchard and it really did seem as though she'd survive her ridiculous decision.

"I think we're going to make it." She told Gupta.

When he fell she thought he'd tripped over something, until she saw the hole in the left arm of his jacket and the dampness caused by fresh blood. The curse of bullet magnet Gupta had struck, it had to be his seventh or maybe eighth wound by old fashioned gunfire.

"Jeez Gupta, not another bullet wound. I'm sure if you were the last person on the planet, you'd find an antique weapon and shoot yourself."

She put her shoulder under his arm and had him on his feet quite quickly. He was apologising, as if being hit by gunfire was his fault. There had been that time though, when Bradford had threatened to drop him down a seismic hole because his medical bills were so high.

"Is he alright?" Asked Cruz.

"Yeah, help me support him. This is about his eighth bullet wound and he hasn't died yet."

"Ninth." Correct Gupta. "My ninth bullet wound."

Her one side and Cruz the other, they weren't exactly running, but they made a decent speed towards the nearest group of boulders.

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The plan had been for them to follow Bradford and hide, waiting close to the bunker, but well away from the APC. The plan hadn't included Chip getting shot though, the plan also hadn't included him refusing to wake up. Maggie slapped his face again, not quite as gently as the previous two tries.

"Chip ! Wake up, we need to get moving."

Probably pointless, even awake he'd never be able to walk all the way to the back of the bunker. She'd pulled Chip behind a wrecked truck just after dawn, using a scorched tarpaulin to build a hide. Maggie was considering leaving Chip and looking for help, when she heard the sound.

Loud combustion driven engines were rare in the Badlands, but she heard one approaching, getting steadily closer. She leant across Chip and picked up his assault rifle. Having two of them was better for continuous fire than trying to put in a fresh clip while under fire. A strange piece of knowledge for her to have picked up at her age, but she'd learned a lot since leaving Desperation.

"Please don't yell in your sleep again." She muttered at Chip.

She'd stopped the bleeding and rebound his wound with her spare shirt. Maggie had even found a medical kit and injected him with antibiotics. Without a proper medic around and considering where they were, she'd done all she could for him. The engine noise sounded like a methane burner and it was getting closer.

"If we survive to get home Chip, I'm never going to wander again.... I'll have kids and be content.... Lots of kids."

Deep inside she knew that if she got home curiosity would always make her want to see what was over the next hill, or in the next valley.

Maggie had the beginnings of a plan when she saw the two man dune buggy drive down the track. It was loud and must have been spine jarring for the two men in it, but they were actually laughing and talking as they pulled up next to the pile of bodies.

".....damn, they never said there'd be this many.... Might take two trips..."

Were people who'd come to clear away the dead always that callous ? One of the young men was actually playfully thumping the other on the arm, as they counted the bodies.

"..... Yeah, we'll need the truck to make two trips Zeke....."

Her plan had been to shoot them both and take their buggy. The arrival of the truck with two more young men in it, forced her to reconsider the plan. No shovels or picks, they'd obviously come to recover the bodies for burial in town.

"..... Oh, look..... They didn't even pile them all up, there are some over there..."

The one called Zeke was walking towards their hide, looking at a body less than ten feet away from where she was crouching. They all must have had weapons, but moving bodies is a job that requires two hands. As far as she could see, none of the four men was actually carrying a blaster. Maggie revised her plan, she'd kill them all and take their truck.

"I love you." She mumbled at Chip.

Maggie stood up, the assault rifle against her shoulder, aimed at Zeke. Her first thought wasn't about dying, it was the realisation that her weapon had probably been manufactured a hundred years before she'd been born. She walked slowly and quietly and managed to get quite close to Zeke before he saw her. Even then his response wasn't hostile.

"Crap ! Did they send another team ? They should have told us."

There were four of them, far too many to subdue and tie up. She shot Zeke, a short burst into his chest. Even then his teammates didn't react in the way she'd expected. The next one closest to her was looking away from her, as if he thought the gunfire had come from town.

"Sorry." She muttered.

Bob who had taught her so much would have said she was violating a sacred code of some kind. To Maggie her only duty was to stay alive and get Chip home in one piece. Her plan was evolving again, becoming more than using the truck to find Bradford. They were going home, she'd had enough of battles and didn't want Chip to die. She shot the man looking away from her, a short burst into his back.

"It's them..... Get your weapon !"

The man shouting must have had a hand held blaster tucked down his belt. He was aiming it at her as she fired. Maggie's jacket had been sacrificed to make bandages, she felt the blaster shot as it went past her shoulder, the heat scorching her shirt. Her shot was more accurate, hitting the man in his chest. The surviving member of the body collection team had the truck door open, his hand on a military blaster. Maggie fired two bursts, the second almost ripped him in half.

"I'm sorry." She muttered, again.

The bark of her rifle must have been heard in the town, though she had no idea if anyone would be sent to investigate. The Ranch had its own problems, at least three fires belching thick black smoke and fierce flames. Maggie assumed she had time to relieve the four men of anything useful and get Chip into the truck.

"Oh, Shit..... Shit !!" She yelled.

Tapping the methane tank on the truck showed it to be only a quarter full, maybe less. She hit the methane tank on the open topped dune buggy and it was full, more than enough to get them back home. That distance in rainy weather, with cold mornings would be hell, but her plan evolved again. They were going home in the buggy.

"At least I've got a jacket again."

The front of the truck had two reasonably clean looking jackets hung over the seats, she put one on right away. Anything else of use she took to the buggy and opened the storage box on the back. It was quite large and already held a basket. There was food and water in there, enough for four hard working body collectors. Not enough to get them back to Desperation, but it was a good start.

"We'll need to live off the land and hope the stream water isn't full of parasites."

Chip next on her mental list of essentials, though getting him into the buggy was going to be a difficult job. Maggie started the buggy, cringing as it seemed to fill everywhere with noise. There would be no stealth journey home, no arriving anywhere quietly. When she got back to Chip, her first move was to pull down the tarpaulin and use it to cover everything in the storage box. It would help to keep everything dry and she needed something to create a tent every night.

"Wake up now Chip..... Please."

She shook him a little and he yelled in his sleep, not the response she'd been hoping for. She dragged him to the buggy, with as much care as is possible when dragging someone over stony ground. He was going to have fresh bruises, especially after she'd pulled him up into the seat. Luckily someone had once fitted the buggy seats with full harness belts, though they didn't appear to have ever been used. She untangled the belts, getting Chip safely strapped in and held in place.

"Am I really going to do this, drive us home ?"

It seemed absurd, her driving experience consisted solely in driving a borrowed trike once and doing a dozen circuits of the settlement. The gears on the buggy were easy though, far less hassle than the

truck would have been. As for Bradford looking for them ? He'd have his own PD489 people to look after.

"He might wonder where we went Chip, but he won't waste hours looking for us, he can't."

Maggie was in the buggy, having a last look around when she saw a matt black door lying some distance away. Seeing the door from Camila's hired APC reminded her of something she'd forgotten with all the worry about Chip.

"The treasure Chip, we earned our share."

When it had been agreed to sacrifice Camila's APC, there had been a secret to keep, even from Bradford and his fighters. The hired APC was finished, using it as a trap hadn't worried anyone, but there were the jewels taken from Flight 2207. The treasure was theirs, no one in their small group wanted to share it, or have PD489 claim it all. A second hide had been dug and the bags placed in it. Maggie opened the door to the second hide, another piece of crate covered in green canvas.

"Diamonds might be worth a fortune in San Pablo City..... But in Desperation...."

Roxy had told her a single diamond would keep Chip and her in luxury for life, their children too. Diamonds would just be shiny rocks in Desperation though, while everyone understood gold.

"I'm sorry Cruz." She muttered.

So much apologising and they were entitled to a share. It was just that Cruz had made such an issue out of collecting the two bags of gold. Maggie had one of Camila's fancy pens from the city in her pocket, borrowed but never returned. She took one bag of gold, just about being able to lift it out of the hide. She wrote on the second bag, though she decided not to add an apology.

'We took our share Mags.'

The people who'd been in the APC had been natural survivors. Hector, Roxy, Cruz and Camila, all tough as nails. One of them was certain to survive and see her note. Maggie had to drag the bag back to the buggy; it took three attempts to get it into the storage box. One last look about and they were off, the engine waking every wild creature for miles.

"I'm crazy of course, we'll both be killed long before arriving home." She mumbled.

The sun was almost directly overhead, before they reached the two insect mounds that looked like sentries. Maggie turned right onto the dried up creek bed and headed south.

"What is that terrible noise Mags ?"

Chip was awake and fidgeting about. His face was still filthy from being in the hide, she should have at least cleaned him up a little. He winced and tried to move his legs.

"Give your leg a chance to heal." She said. "The noise is us, the buggy I stole. We're on our way home."

She'd have been upset if he'd started making a fuss about Yasmine looking at his wound, or wanting them to go and find Bradford. He gave her a very grubby faced grin.

"Good..... Is there anything to eat ? I'm starving."

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"We lost Pete Guber clearing out the creatures." Said Stephan. "There's no sign of any human enemy though, just dozens of those huge scorpion creatures."

"Show me." Snapped Vincent.

He'd been so convinced the enemy were after the advanced tech stored on floor G. Not that anyone in The Ranch knew how most of the tech worked, apart from the weapons of course. Any fool can point a blaster and pull the trigger. One device had destroyed a barn, leaving nothing but a twenty foot crater and three men to bury. It was the potential of the tech that mattered, once they understood it. The tech really was their future, he was sure of it.

“Careful Reverend, the floor is a bit slippery.”

The huge scorpions had poured out of the first sealed door they'd opened. There had just been him and a few raiders then, the settlers began to arrive once there was a thriving town and a few farms. It was tinned goods the settlers had wanted, those and weapons of course, everyone wanted a reliable blaster, or even an old bullet firing assault rifle.

“It looks like the bugs were trying to build a nest in here.” Said Stephan.

“Everything needs cleaning, it must all be cleaned.” He snapped.

The scorpions were the first plague he'd let loose and in many ways they were still the worst. Tough and hard to kill, they'd dug lairs deep in the ground and bred like cockroaches. Now they'd dug their way back into the bunker and had tried to set up home with his precious tech. Vincent used his own blaster to destroy one of their egg sacks.

“Vermin..... I want every trace of them to be cleaned up...Today !”

His men began to react, carrying the body of Pete Guber out into the corridor. They were used to carrying out his orders without question, some were dragging away the huge dead scorpions. It was Stephan who brought his thoughts back into focus again.

“Perhaps Luke was right Reverend. Should we follow him down to the lowest levels ? Your son only took a few men with him.”

It meant admitting his vision had been wrong, but Luke might need their help.

“Luke, yes of course. We'll clean the stores once the invaders have been dealt with. We're not far from the central stairs, we might get down to Sub Level II before him.”

“What about my brother Reverend ? We can't leave him here.”

Walt Guber, brother of the dead man in the corridor. There was something about Walt, he always seemed one sarcastic comment away from insubordination. Walt was good with pigs though and there was no methane without pig muck.

“We will come back for Pete.” Said Vincent. “We need to go now though, the living must be our first concern.”

“So your kin matter more than mine ?”

“Easy Walt, the Reverend gave his orders.” Said Stephan.

“Pahhhh.... Had another vision has he ? I'm going home, the invaders are welcome to this place.”

Vincent should have ordered his men to arrest Walt. At worst he should have ordered Stephan to fire the fatal shot. There was something about such a brutal piece of sarcasm.... It had to be punished. Vincent raised his blaster and shot Walt Guber between the eyes.

“There will be no further questioning of my orders.” He said. “We will use the main stairs and find my son..... Now !”

They began to move, until the emergency lights started to do something they'd never done before. Vincent thought it was the start of another vision, until it was obvious his men saw it too.

“I never knew they could do that.” Someone said.

“Maybe the invaders did it ?”

The emergency lights were brighter, much brighter. After about a minute there was a voice, an automated announcement, though Vincent had never noticed speakers anywhere in the bunker. The voice was female and melodic, official sounding but friendly.

‘There has been a major containment failure. All main doors will close and seal shut in forty minutes.’

“What do we do Reverend ?” Asked Stephan.

“You have my orders. Proceed to the main stairs.”

'There has been a major containment failure. All main doors will close and seal shut in forty minutes.'

His men became a rabble in front of his eyes, running towards the door, turning left towards the surface. Vincent found a crate that wasn't covered in scorpion blood and sat on it. He felt surprisingly calm.

"Shall I go after them?" Asked Stephan.

"No, they'll probably kill you. They want to get out and see their families again. There isn't time to reach the surface though, or time enough for us to find Luke."

Stephan sat on a crate near him.

"So that's it then?" He asked.

"I believe it is Stephan. I intend to carry on down and find my son, even if we're both trapped in this dreadful place. You may join me if you wish?"

"Thank you Reverend, I will come with you."

"Vincent, call me Vincent."

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'There has been a major containment failure. All main doors will close and seal shut in forty minutes.'

Hector thumped the keyboard, but it was ignoring him. The screen was showing just one line in flashing green letters.

'User invalid – Contact Your Supervisor.'

The lights were suddenly brighter and a woman's voice was telling them the bunker was about to seal shut. The worst thing of all, was knowing it was his fault.

"Christ, what have you done Hector?" Asked Bradford.

"I watched what Chip did and we needed a floor plan." Said Hector. "He found a terminal still online and it was fine. Now this fucking thing has locked up on me."

Hector thumped the keys quite hard, realising he might have sealed them all up inside a vast tomb. Everyone knew forty minutes wasn't long enough to get to the surface.

"We could risk an elevator." Said Allison.

"No elevators, not after I saw what was left of Jim." Said Roxy. "We broke into the Theta Lab bunker, so we can break out of this one. A ventilation grill or a service door.... We've got explosives."

Bradford looked at Camila, as did everyone else. Like it or not, she was now their acknowledged expert on all things that went bang or boom.

"Can we do it Camila?" Asked Bradford. "Can you blow a hole in this place and get us out of here?"

"This is an old structure, the entry points for ventilation ducts will be worn and corroded and there are water pipes going in and out." Said Camila. "If we survive and if we get back to the surface level..... Then yes, I'm fairly sure I can make a hole big enough to get us out."

"Only fairly sure." Said Hector.

"You want guarantees Hector?" Spat Camila. "Did anyone ask you for guarantees before you started playing with the computer? If we get back to the top floor, I'm pretty sure I can get us out, that's all I'll guarantee."

"We'll carry on going down." Said Bradford. "Hector can make amends for breaking the computer by taking the lead again. Not that I'm expecting Roxy to do a second shift. Any volunteers?"

"No, I'd better go with him." Said Roxy. "He needs someone to stop him tripping over and bumping into things."

"Yeah, hilarious Roxy, I'm splitting my sides."

Hector took one last swipe at the computer keyboard, before picking up his assault rifle and heading for the stairs.

'There has been a major containment failure. All main doors will close and seal shut in thirty five minutes.'

"I wish we could shut that off." Said Sequel.

"Get Hector to adjust it, that'll break it." Said Camila.

Hector knew he wasn't flavour of the month. He had done exactly what Chip had done, but instead of showing a floor plan the damn terminal had locked up.

"We should have brought Chip." He muttered at Roxy.

"No, they deserved some time together."

The lower floors were different, smaller than the main floors above, everything more compact. There had to be elevators somewhere, though he hadn't seen once since Lower Level 5. They were using a set of stairs that went round the inner edge of the bunker, constantly descending lower. Hector passed through another set of doors which had been opened by brute force. They were in yet another anti-room, looking through hardened glass at empty cages.

"Why did they do it.... Keep opening the doors?" Asked Allison. "They could see what they were letting out, they knew the dangers."

There was a set of thick metal doors next to the hardened glass window. They too had been opened by men using hammers and chisels. The cages in the room were all empty, apart from a layer of animal crap and the stench that went with it.

"I'm beginning to understand Vincent." Said Bradford. "He was like a magician, opening doors and finding tinned food, weapons and lots of advanced tech. He build the town using that magic and must have wondered what might happen if the magician stopped pulling rabbits out of the hat."

"His settlement would probably break apart, he must have known that." Said Roxy.

Sequel had his forehead pressed to the glass, looking at the mess beyond. He hadn't said much, but like his brother, he came into his own when the fighting became fiercest.

"What do you think they ate?" He asked. "I mean.... They had to be eating something."

"We had a lot of talks about that." Said Roxy. "At first I thought someone must have been feeding them, but perhaps there was an automatic food system."

"Maybe they ate each other, until just the strongest survived." Suggested Hector.

It had been Maggie's pet theory, absurd of course. Hector said it expecting more sarcastic comments, but Bradford merely shrugged at him.

"Maybe, it's irrelevant really." Said Bradford. "We need to keep going down."

'There has been a major containment failure. All main doors will close and seal shut in twenty minutes.'

The voice made Hector move faster, even though he was moving deeper, further away from any doors that were still open. Six or seven minutes of descending stairs brought them to another broken in set of doors. The door on the opposite side of the anti-chamber was still sealed.

"Looks like we've reached as far as we can go, but it's probably not the bottom." Said Roxy.

No one commented, they were all looking at the hardened glass window and the room beyond it.

There were cages there, but they were all empty, the creatures moving about as they pleased.

"They've got wings..... Huge furry people with wings." Said Sequel.

Hector found it almost impossible to believe what he was seeing. The creatures looked like humans, eight foot tall, muscular humans. Given tools they'd have probably broken out, but the doors were

just bowed out a little. Claws and sharp teeth seemed an essential for all Deoxy Research creations. The wings were what demanded your attention, huge leathery wings like those of a bat.

“These really are an affront to nature, abominations.” Said Camila.

“I could show you worse, the lowest level was built for something their documents describe as better than human.”

There were several men behind them, all holding up their hands in surrender.

“Who the hell are you ?” Asked Bradford.

“I am Luke, leader in waiting for this..... Dreadful place. The men with me share my belief, that this bunker and everything in it must be destroyed. I’m assuming you’re here for the same reason ? You’ve shown no inclination to loot the place.”

“I came to rescue my friends.” Said Bradford. “Now though, I want to destroy the bunker before these monsters breed and attack San Pablo City. How can they be destroyed ?”

Luke only had a few men with him and they all looked ill at ease.

“There is a way, though I can’t guarantee it won’t kill us all.” Said Luke.

~ ~

“There is no such thing as, just a tactical nuke.” Said Bradford.

Luke had taken them back up a floor and opened a secret door in the wall. It might well have been a trap, but Bradford thought it was a very complex one, considering Luke and his men could have simply shot them all in the back. A long spiral staircase led down to a control room for the device planted below the bunker. A tactical nuke guaranteed to bring a quick death to every living thing in the bunker.

“My father isn’t aware that the device exists, I found the door by accident.” Said Luke. “I even ripped out all the electrical cables to stop anyone tracing its location. If we set it off, it’ll be by manual controls.”

“That’s crazy, you’ll kill us all and everyone in your town.” Said Sequel.

“What’s the yield of this thing ?” Asked Bradford.

It all looked so old, especially with broken cables hanging from the ceiling. Crowded too, with everyone crushed into quite a tiny room. As final fail-safes went, it was unimpressive and scary at the same time. Luke pointed at a brass plate riveted to the inside of the door.

“Deoxy were thorough, paper documents perish, but that plate was designed to last forever. It gives the manual detonation procedure and a few other bits of information. The yield is given as two kilotons.” Said Luke.

“Not huge, but still enough to kill everyone in The Ranch.” Said Camila.

“And all of us.” Added Sequel.

“It’s shaped to give an upward blast and the outer walls of the bunker were built to survive a near hit from bombs with a hundred times that power.” Said Luke. “With luck the explosion won’t even breach the outer walls.”

“He’s got a point..... About the walls.” Said Camila.

“Maybe, but this place is old and designed to stop a blast from outside, not inside.” Said Bradford.

“We should vote on it.” Said one of the PD489 operatives.

“No, we’re not a democracy..... I’ll decide.” Said Bradford.

Luke was nodding at him as the female voice they’d all grown to loathe told them the outside doors were just five minutes away from closing, forever.

“Do you want to see the creatures in the bottom level ?” Asked Luke. “Just you, it’s a narrow crawl space with an inspection window at the end.”

Bradford wasn't sure if he wanted to see the monsters intended to be better than man, but he accepted the offer and crawled on his belly for about twenty feet, following Luke. The window was tiny, barely enough room for one. Luke hugged the wall, giving Bradford space to look at what inhabited the lowest level of the bunker.

"Those they put into some sort of suspended animation, though I've seen a few of their hands moving recently."

There had to be a thousand of them, all sleeping on separate medical couches of some kind. As Bradford's eye adjusted to the low lighting, he revised his estimate to five thousand, maybe more. The room was large, every inch of it used to hold the creatures.

"Now do you see why we need to detonate the bomb?" Asked Luke.

Larger than humans and more muscular, the creatures were covered in tough grey scales. It was armour, but organic, a living part of their bodies. The wings were no longer leathery, that idea had obviously been dropped in favour of far stronger looking wings. Grey again, everything about the monsters was grey, right down to the claws on their hands and several rows on sharp teeth. They looked like every general's wet dream, humans turned into the ultimate urban pacification force. "Imagine if they get out and breed." Said Luke. "They're bound to be clever too, probably more intelligent than us."

Bradford was already imagining them in their tens of thousands, destroying all life in San Pablo City.

"We'll set off the bomb Luke..... It must be suicide for us all though."

"Maybe not.... Deoxy built an escape tunnel."

'There has been a major containment failure. All main doors are now closed and sealed. Protocol Gilgamesh is now in effect.'

"What the hell is protocol Gilgamesh?" Asked Bradford.

"I have no idea."

~ ~

Stephan was trailing behind Vincent, who ran down the last flight of stairs and into the anti-chamber. There had been no trace of Luke on their journey down the main stairs, or the invaders.

"Vincent, there are foot prints in the dirt here..... Vincent."

He found the leader of The Ranch looking through the glass at the monsters beyond.

"Think of it Stephan.... If we could get in there and past those abominations. Think what wonders we might find."

"Be careful, those things are strong."

"Nonsense, the door has held them in there for decades."

"There are foot prints Vincent, back the way we came. I think there may be a hidden passageway."

"Well done Stephan, we may yet find my son."

'There has been a major containment failure. All main doors are now closed and sealed. Protocol Gilgamesh is now in effect.'

Stephan had no idea about Gilgamesh, though he suspected it wasn't going to be pleasant. Explosive bolts fired, filling the room with a sound that deafened his ears. As the doors fell inwards, the creatures rushed out, focusing on the closest food, Vincent. Stephan watched as his master was killed in a matter of seconds and devoured. The monsters then came for him.

~ ~

"We're going to use the nuke." Said Bradford.

Roxy wasn't surprised, she couldn't see how they were going to escape though. Dying didn't scare her, it just seemed such an unpleasant place to die. She'd always pictured her death as being more dignified, surrounded by crying grandchildren.

"So that's it, we're blowing ourselves up." She said. "At least it'll be quick."

"Deoxy Research knew this might happen and there is an escape tunnel." Said Luke. "You all need to move back a bit. Sorry..... Scrunch up against the walls. More, or the door won't open."

Luke must have spent a lot of time pulling and tugging at the various bit of metal on the walls, the correct order to open the door was quite complex. A small round door swung back, almost striking two of Luke's fighters.

"Wow, that looks dark and unpleasant." Said Camila.

"No lights and you'll be running while crouched." Said Luke. "I have been to the end and it is open to the world, literally. The tunnel has been broken open by a river and now ends at a pile of loose scree and rubble, with the river a hundred feet below. Not a pleasant climb, but I have done it."

"Not with a bomb going off behind you." Said Sequel.

"How long have we got after you set the timer?" Asked Bradford.

Roxy knew what Luke was going to say, it was obvious really, even without the look on his face.

"There is no timer, just a short series of procedures and a lever to be pulled." He said. "I'll have to stay and set it off, after closing the door behind you. I'll give you fifteen minutes before setting off the nuke, that should be ample."

"Should be." Said Hector.

"Oh, fuck off Hector..... The guy is going to die." Said Camila.

Everyone looked stunned, though no one was volunteering to take his place, until Hector surprised everyone.

"I'll do it.....Your settlement will need a leader Luke."

"No, I'm the leader, it should be me." Said Bradford.

"You're all idiots, it has to be me." Said Allison. "You know why Bradford, how long until I can no longer control the beast inside me..... I don't want to end up like the 'things' we've seen."

It all made no sense to Roxy, but Bradford was nodding and seemed to be willing to let her do it.

"Hey, this is nonsense..... We'll draw lots or something." She said.

"No, I need to do this." Said Allison.

"There is nothing to repay Allison, Dimitri used you." Said Bradford.

"Get going everyone..... Luke, do the bits and pieces and just leave me with the lever to pull." Said Allison.

"I'm not listening to anymore of this crap." Said Roxy. "Come on Hector, get yourself into that tunnel, I'll be right behind you."

They only just fitted and running was really just a fast walk. Others followed them, she could hear their footsteps and hear their breathing. It wasn't completely dark, there was a round circle of daylight in the distance and it was gradually getting larger. About halfway to the end of the tunnel she heard the door behind them slam closed. Poor Hector suffered the indignity of her slapping his backside.

"Run, we only have fifteen minutes."

There was a drop of about four feet onto the pile of scree, she lost her footing and tumbled. Covered in dust she arrived at the bottom, quickly getting out of the way of those behind her. The stream was at the bottom of a steep crack in the ground, the water looked wonderfully clean and clear.

"Take the lead Roxy, run..... Run downstream..... Run like a nuke is about to explode behind you."

Bradford shouting at her, so she ran and carried on running. When the explosion came the ground beneath her buckled upwards and then dropped back again. Roxy was left trying to run on nothing but air, until she hit the ground and rolled herself up into a ball.

~ ~

There was no coronation, but there were no rivals to dispute Luke becoming the next leader of The Ranch, though he told everyone not to call him Reverend.

“No more visions, no more Reverend.”

Luke took the name his father had loathed, calling himself Luke Excelsior Willard. His first task as leader was probably one of the most difficult, convincing his people that the invaders were really on their side and Vincent had been the real enemy. A difficult task, which was likely to cause him trouble for many years.

The APC had been destroyed in the blast and radiation was leaking from the ground. Luke decided to move their town, rebuilding it further east in the centre of the farmlands. New Beginnings it was to be called, cheesy perhaps, but appropriate. He gave Bradford a large flatbed truck to take his people home. Quite a gift considering how few trucks he had left.

Bradford did organise a search for Maggie and Chip, until Cruz told him they'd decided to make their own way home, though he was reluctant to say how he knew that.

~ ~

Amoe watched a six month old Rosa, rolling about in her playpen. So far she hadn't flung a chair across the room or shown any other superpowers. She seemed to be a normal baby girl, just becoming interested in sitting up on her own.

“Giver her time Amoe, give her time.” Gillian had told her.

Maria was with her, their Thursday afternoon gossips had become a bit of a ritual. Not that Bradford hid much from her, it was just that Maria seemed to get the news first.

“Oh, Rosa's growing so fast.” Said Maria

“And best of all she sleeps at least five hours a night.”

“More than Bradford.”

Amoe wasn't happy that Maria knew such things about her husband. There was a few moments of silence, a slightly strained atmosphere. Amoe wasn't about to let it damage their friendship though.

“You probably know PD489 get their third new VTOL today.” She said. “Bradford is like a kid getting a new toy. Part of the new ‘Bug Defence Force,’ as he calls it. President Herbert wants to go out and destroy the hybrid monsters, before they attack the city.”

The real name was the Herbert Defence Force, always one for self-promotion was Otis Herbert.

Amoe leant across the table and took a sip of Maria's wine, another part of their Thursday ritual.

“I do know something even Bradford doesn't know yet.” Said Maria.

“Go on tell me, you know I don't tell tales.”

“Otis is going to give the extra funding to make the HDF another branch of the armed services. Guess who he's going to get to run it ?”

Amoe could feel her face blushing, supposing Maria was teasing her ? Mind you, she had doubted her when she'd mentioned Gupta and Yasmine being back together and that had turned out to be true.

“Not..... Not my Bradford ?”

Maria merely nodded at her. It was enough for Amoe to indulge herself with a full mouthful of Devil's Promise. Strangely Amoe's first response surprised even her.

“Well, we’re not moving..... I can tell you that. I feel safe in 7 East Central and I want Rosa to grow up feeling safe.”

“I can understand that, it’s probably why Maggie went back to live in Desperation, dragging Chip along with her.” Said Maria.

“Are they married now ?”

“No, just the usual nod from the headman and everyone considers them married.”

“Do you hear much about the settlements ?” Asked Amoe.

“Mainly Desperation, Camila still visits Hector occasionally, he is still officially on the PD489 payroll. Roxy still runs the town, though she’s refused offers of government help lately. She claims to have other sources of money. You can guess what that means ?”

“Oh yes, Bradford will be arresting Hector again and probably Roxy.”

“Sure as eggs is eggs.” Said Maria.

~ ~

Did Rosa grow up to win every event at the school sports day ? That, as they say, is a story for another day.....

~ ~

~ The End ~

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