

## Bradford II – Badlands

### Chapter 5 - Longmont

**“They do say we each have a guardian angel, though Hector suspected that his had been on vacation for a while. His angel was probably lying on a poolside lounge somewhere hot, with a Mai Tai in his hand. A guy of course, the local priest had once told him all angels were men. Then he’d received a beating for saying that sounded a pretty fucked up way to organise heaven.”**

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The chair he had to sit in looked the same as the diagnostic chair, which Gillian had sat him in once a month for years. But this one was in the main lab of the PD489 headquarters building. There was no pretty young nurse to warn him when the procedure might be a little uncomfortable. Oh, that phrase could mean anything from a slight scratch, to half an hour of pure agony. LabSync4 was now gone, its staff either dead or run away to one of the other New Nations. Gillian McBride now ran the PD489 lab of course and she had brought a few bright people with her. No pretty nurse to lie to him though, about how painless it was all going to be.

“There used to be at least half a dozen nurses.” He said. “When you did these tests in the LabSync4 building.”

“Two dead and at least three of them now living in San Sebastian.” Said Gillian. “Though I suspect you’re really asking me about Tamara, in a very roundabout way. You always did have a soft spot for her and I’m pretty sure it was mutual.”

That cheered him up, as the pain increased. Only a routine piece of torture, to make sure all the augmentations to his body were working to maximum efficiency.

“Tamara, yes I remember her name now.” He said. “She had a really nice smile and lied so well.”  
“Lied ?”

“About how it was only going to be a little painful.”

Gillian actually rolled her eyes at him, her way of telling him not to be a baby. She’d never been the one sat in the chair though, having her cells bombarded with something or other.

“I can probably find her..... Tamara I mean.” Said Gillian. “She’d probably like a decent job again, with a pension and a few perks.”

“You know where she is, don’t you Gillian ?”

There had been no general amnesty for ex LabSync4 staff, but Tamara had been fairly junior and unlikely to have broken the law in any major way. Gillian was nodding at him. Getting the budget for extra staff wasn’t a problem and Roland could arrange a fake ID.....

“Hire her Gillian and I’ll take care of the paperwork... Or rather Roland will. Crap ! That hurts.... What are you doing to me ?”

“The first thorough set of tests in far too long.” She replied. “A more desk bound job has been good for all the hairline bone fracture you used to get. All healed up..... Obviously getting hit less by blunt objects, is good for you.”

And soon Tamara would there to dote on him a little. The pain increased, making a few gentle words and a little doting seem like the promised land.

“It feels like the Nano devices are going crazy.” He said.

"You're not a Nano-Aug, you're the real deal Bradford..... DNA alteration and re-sequencing." Said Gillian. "Expensive and as the guy who designed the idea is now dead, you're likely to remain one of a kind."

"The famous Michael M Reece designed my alterations, I assume ?"

"Yes and Gregory Halster, who is also dead. Nano-Augs usually need so much work done to the basic body architecture, that they end up looking more like robots than humans. You're just as strong and you've kept your boyish good looks..... Well, on a good day."

The chair must have stopped running tests, because the pain ceased. Gillian looked at a screen, making notes on an old fashioned clip board. Using such things was a hangover from the paranoia of working for LabSync4, where little was trusted to computer documents.

"Perfect Bradford." She said. "I assume you're expecting trouble in the near future ? You have been quite good at avoiding these tests."

"I have something to do in Longmont tomorrow night and it might need some of my old skills. I just wanted to make sure everything still worked."

"You're as good as you ever were.... I heard Longmont is pretty bad these days, lots of subversives and drug gangs. Be careful, you're my favourite test subject."

Gillian was as about as close as it came to having a living family and she fussed over him like a proud mother.

"Oh, I intend to be very careful." He said.

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There were still busses in Longmont and people who used them, but less than there had once been. The old bus garage had room for over a hundred busses to be parked up overnight and it had an entire floor of offices for the bus company. The mistake had been building it on the edge of town, near the junction of a dozen major roads, but miles from anywhere the police considered worth protecting. After the umpteenth burglary and the death of yet another night guard, the bus company built a smaller garage, in the heart of town.

"This brings back so many memories." Said Gupta. "None of them good ones."

"Maria's intel report says the homeless now stay away from this place." Said Bradford.

It had been a fairly solid building, before the subs had used a military railgun to try and kill Bradford and Maria. Gupta was there too, but just a new recruit then and unlikely to be on any subversive's hit list.

"Drive inside." Camila told the driver.

Her driver, driving a PD489 armoured personnel carrier. It was a combined mission with Camila and her gang, the Hyenas. An unofficial mission of course, there had been quite a few of those recently. The driver brought the APC to a halt, about ten yards inside the old bus garage.

"No movement, no body heat on the detectors." Said Gupta. "The building looks safe."

Safe was a relative term though and parts of the bus garage looked likely to collapse, though hopefully after they'd left.

"The railgun blasted enough holes in the roof to let the weather in." Said Bradford. "The plants then took hold in the nice damp conditions."

It could only have been two years at the most, since the battle with the subs, which had destroyed the building. The plants had taken hold though, with some vines stretching right up to the roof. A few more years and Longmont Bus Station, would be just a few vine covered pieces of rubble.

"Mother nature doesn't fuck about." Said Cruz.

Cruz had been a loyal member of the Hyenas, until Camila took over. He'd then shown a little wisdom and shifted his loyalty to her. Large, black and good in a fight, Camila took him almost everywhere with her.

"Check your equipment." Said Bradford. "We'll be heading north in five minutes."

Three other Hyena members nodded at him, though he didn't recognise them. If things went well, he'd have a lot of recorded evidence and a few names to give Maria. If things went badly and Longmont was littered with bodies... Then it'd be just another gang related incident.

"Monstera deliciosa." Said Gupta, rubbing a vine leaf.

"Huh ?" Asked Bradford.

"Cheese plant boss... Used to be only mildly invasive, but now a real pest."

"They're welcome to this dump." Said Bradford.

Pastor Ivor thought the skin bugs and invasive plants were a punishment from God, inflicted on what was left of mankind. Bradford thought of it as Mother Nature, putting humans in their place. He fiddled with the light armour worn under his clothing, making it more comfortable. His Ion blaster showed a charge of 99%, more than enough for an urban skirmish.

"Dimitri will be operating out of a large APC, about a mile north of here." Said Bradford. "No talking once I say so, no radios, no phones... Nothing at all turned on that might go beep or buzz... Do you all understand ?"

Lots of nodding heads and a few mutters in his general direction. They were all experienced professionals, but it didn't hurt to remind them to be careful about anything which might give away their presence. Bradford nodded at Camila. It would be her mission once they headed north, he'd be there merely as an observer and gatherer of intelligence.

"Move out." Said Camila.

The cloud cover was hiding the moon, making it a very dark night. Perfect if you wanted to sneak up on someone unobserved.

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Hector was quite surprised at how well he'd settled in to life in Desperation. The one problem had been not responding when people called out to Jared. Now he reacted quite quickly, but it had taken a while. Luckily everyone seemed to put it down to a moody temperament and those were quite common out in the Badlands.

"Hey, you are good at fixing stuff." Said young Maggie.

"Would I lie to you ?"

"Lots do."

The large five foot diameter fan had driven him crazy when he'd last lived in Desperation. It had rattled and clanged for a good ten minutes after starting up, a real annoyance if it kicked in at three in the morning. There hadn't been spare parts or new bearings, there never was.

"A bit of a bodge." He admitted. "I packed the bearings with graphite grease. Should give us peaceful nights for at least six months."

"So you're intending to hang around ?" Asked Roxy.

He hadn't seen her approach. It felt so strange, talking to Roxy as though she was a stranger, when they'd spent so much time together, getting hot and sweaty. He'd been worried she might recognise his scent, everyone gave off an odour in Desperation. Water was scarce and clothes changed too infrequently. Roxy had shown no sign of recognising him though. It was odd, like being a ghost visiting his own past.

"Time to put down some roots." He replied. "And I need to keep off a few people's radar for a while."

She smiled at him, but didn't ask for details. Half the population of the town, was probably on the run from someone.

"He's going to look at the water filter system next." Said Maggie.

"I didn't know we had one."

"You don't, but I can probably rig something up by borrowing the filters from the old bunker. The stuff is decades old, so don't expect miracles."

"Clever stuff.... Will it get rid of the yellow stuff in the water?"

"He says it will." Said Maggie.

He'd seen it before. Few kids her age to hang out with and a mystery guy arrives, who seems interesting. He gave it two months, maybe three, before she considered him to be just another boring old geezer.

"Yeah, it should get rid of that yellow tint in the water and a few other things besides." He said.

"What is the yellow stuff?" Asked Roxy. "Sometimes it's gritty."

"Ferrous salts out of the rocks.... Basically rust, with a few other things."

"Ewww, now I wish I hadn't asked. Need anyone to help in the old bunker? I can arrange for a couple of guys to go with you."

"I should be fine."

"I'm going with him." Added Maggie.

Roxy smiled at him and rolled her eyes a little.

"Fine, just bring her back in one piece Jared....A few of us have grown quite fond of her."

Roxy went, leaving him with a decision to make. Maggie was just a kid and might turn out to be a hindrance. Bob had said she was good with a blaster though and it might be useful to have someone watching his back.

"Are you really a good shot with a blaster?" He asked.

"Never miss.... Would I lie to you?"

"Lots do. Get your leather jacket and weapons then, we want to get it done before dark."

"It's too hot for my jacket."

"There could be anything living down there. Your leathers might slow down its claws a bit."

She never flinched, before heading off to get her gear. He liked the kid, she just might survive in the Badlands for long enough to become an adult.

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Amoe wasn't sure if it had been necessary to leave her home with nothing but the bag she took everywhere and her winning smile. Until someone from PD489 had linked Bradford's home terminal, into surveillance cameras in the apartment in 11 Ocean. At first she hadn't told her mother about the recording of a mysterious intruder in the middle of the night. That was until an intruder had appeared in her mother's house, again during the hour between three and four in the morning.

"Can they get the image any brighter?" Asked Haunani Lee. "That could be anyone."

"He's wearing a mask mom. Image intensifiers are good, but not that good."

"Hmmm, if you say so dear."

Camila had promised to find her mother another apartment in the block, but it was taking a while.

Having Haunani living with her and Bradford had been one of her recurring nightmares, the way some people dream about ten foot tall spiders or slashers under the bed. Now that nightmare was

actually happening. They even had to be careful about making noises during sex. Her mom had to go, before she drove her crazy.

“I could go home, if Bradford just moved some of the guards to my house.”

“The Hyenas might attract some attention in your neighbourhood.”

“Silly name for them, Bradford should change it.”

It wasn't that her mom was stupid or suffering from dementia. Haunani Lee was as smart as she'd always been. Living with her father had required quite a bit of blind eye turning and some self-deception. She'd simply carried that over to their current situation. The members of the Hyenas guarding them were cops, sent by Bradford. Her mom had invented a world in her head, which comforted her, by being far more cosy and safe than reality.

“We could go shopping mom, the Destiny Mall if you like ?”

Everyone looked like they belonged in Destiny Mall, from their gang bodyguards, to business men sweating in their suits. It was also a public place with plenty of security cameras. Ok, someone had once tried to kill everyone inside with a hideous infection, but that had been a one off, as far as she knew.

“Oh yes, I can buy some new underwear.... And they sell those delicious chocolates.”

Amoe opened the apartment door, knowing that at least two members of the Hyenas would be sitting on the wall outside. She recognised one, a boy of about twenty, with beautiful brown eyes. He also wore gang colours in a bandana tied round his forehead. No, there was no using them to guard her mom's house. In the Destiny Mall, they'd fit right in.

“We're going to the Destiny Mall for a little shopping.”

She had no idea of his name, the boy with those brown eyes. He just nodded at her and barked orders at the other guy.

“About five minutes, I'll call your phone.” He said.

“Thank you.”

It would take her mom longer than that to get ready, but the Hyenas never complained about waiting. They were the sort of thugs she hated Bradford associating with. Now they were keeping her and her mom safe. The irony wasn't lost on her.

“Five minutes mom, we're going shopping.”

“But what shoes shall I wear ?”

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The trudge over broken concrete and potholed roads had been difficult in the dark. They all had image intensifier goggles, but they tended to give blinkered vision. Bradford had considered Gupta to be the one most likely to fall down a hole or bash his shins against something hard and unyielding. It turned out to be a bad night for Camila though, who'd collided with at least three metal stumps, which had once been lampposts.

“Damn goggles show you the ground or in the distance, but not both.” She'd complained.

There were roads north of the bus station, a whole network of them, two even kept in reasonable repair. No one drove at night though, apart from the bad guys. Camila brought them to a halt behind what had once been a roadside diner. Nature had taken over, with vines covering the plastic chairs and breaking up the walls.

“Damn, I've got bruises in places, where I didn't know I had places.” Muttered Camila.

“Dimitri is here, but no sign of any customers.” Said Cruz.

Just a single yellow light about a hundred yards away. Bradford used the zoom on his goggles, to see the large APC, with the back open. The yellow light was on top of a traffic cone, Dimitri's equivalent of a 'shop open,' sign. A bit early for customers, some of his men were busy shifting boxes around.

"That's a lot of firepower." Said Gupta. "Does he still just sell pharmaceuticals?"

"There's no just when it comes to keeping people supplied with everything from generic headache pills, right through to cancer drugs and anti-bacterials." Said Bradford. "Everyone buys from Dimitri... I've even seen one of his boxes in the president's bathroom cabinet."

"His stuff works too." Added Camila. "I've never heard of anyone dying from buying crap pills from him."

"Where does his stock come from?" Asked Gupta.

"A few of the New Nations, including one San Pablo is still not officially trading with." Said Camila.

"No one gives a shit about sanctions, if their kid needs a cancer drug."

"We need to be closer..... Close enough to identify faces." Said Bradford.

It was risky, Dimitri's guys might have listening devices and their own image intensifiers. They took it slowly and carefully, until they were within twenty yards of the old methane burning APC. No more talking, they all hid behind whatever cover they could find. Bradford could see Dimitri now, sat in the back of the old APC, like a king on his throne. Camila appeared out of the darkness, whispering softly into his ear.

"Do we kill them all, once you get your recognised face?"

"No."

She simply nodded at him and vanished, back to where her Hyenas were hiding. He might not recognise the face and have to rely on Maria's vast database. Everything any of them saw through their goggles went onto a data cube, but that could be destroyed, if things went pear shaped. Besides, he owed Dimitri, as did quite a few of his team. From the dark days, when Bradford had been a renegade on the run. During that time, Dimitri had supplied him with much needed medical supplies. At full price of course, business always comes first in San Pablo.

"Over here."

"Would a few more lights really hurt?"

One of the guards, calling out to a customer. Some drove right up to where the APC was parked, but others left their vehicles and walked for the last few yards. Foibles and paranoia of course, Dimitri had never been known to attack paying customers. Bradford zoomed in on a face he knew, the chief officer of a hospital in City North. Everyone bought from Dimitri.

The night went on, boredom becoming a danger. So easy to fall asleep, or drop something, or make a noise that might be heard. Face after face went onto the data cube, most unknown to him. None were 'the face,' though. Something instinctive told him he'd know the face, or Marie wouldn't have pointed him at the meeting in Longmont. More faces, until the piles of boxes had almost gone. It was only half an hour before dawn, when Bradford heard a voice he knew.

"Always six guards." Said Dimitri. "I'm beginning to think you don't trust me."

"Longmont isn't somewhere for a pleasant night time walk."

It was strange but done without malice, or any kind of prejudice. A voice he'd heard so often on the phone or in person, showing him in to see the president. Yet he had trouble coming up with a full name to go with the voice. Such people always became invisible, it was almost part of their job. He used the goggles, recording the face and voice.

"You did well, there's a little extra in your New Borongan bank account."

Jason, but Bradford needed to think hard for a second name. Cetrone, yes, the man handing a thick A4 envelope to Dimitri, was Jason Cetrone. A man with no official title, who answered Otis Herbert's phone and arranged important meetings. Someone so invisible, that there probably wasn't even an intelligence file on him.

"Crap !" Bradford quietly muttered.

So many ways he might be being played, with only one certainty. Someone he knew and trusted, was setting him up for something. Bradford lifted his Ion blaster, moving the targeting screen from Jason to Dimitri and then back again. He'd been wrong in his assessment of both of them and that annoyed him. He didn't kill either of them of course. The APC drove away just before dawn, the methane engine filling the air with the smell he loved, the engine roaring as the vehicle headed towards San Pablo. Ten minutes after dawn, Camila herded everyone up, to begin the walk back to the bus station. His knees ached as he stood up, forcing him to make a grunting noise.

"Oh Camila, the doc says I'm, in good shape.... But I ache."

"You're not used to it anymore."

He didn't feel so bad, when Cruz walked past, moaning about what the cool morning breeze was doing to his back. Bradford kept away from the others as they walked, until he and Camila had some privacy.

"Did you get everything on data cube ?" He asked.

"Yes, Gupta got everyone anyway, even the guards. He's good at things like that."

"You must have recognised Jason Cerone ?" He asked.

"Yes I did. Do I send the data cube contents to Maria, or destroy it ?"

So tempting to destroy it all, but it was too big for that. Maria wouldn't act on it before talking it over with him.

"We're talking about President Otis Herbert arranging for Douglas DeFreitas to be killed." He said.

"Which makes no sense at all. If I'd been asked, I'd have done it discreetly and for free."

"Me too, the guy was an arsehole." Said Camila.

"Or Pastor Ivor is playing me, which.... I don't think is likely."

"So, the data.... Send or delete ?"

"Send it and I'll go and talk to Maria about it."

Their APC hadn't been stripped down while they'd been gone, though a few feral cats had to be shooed away. They seemed to be another growing problem, to go with the skin bugs and invasive plant life.

"Damn things." Said Cruz, as he shouted and yelled, until the cats wandered off.

"They're harmless." Said Bradford.

"Eww, the APC stinks.... They piss over everything." Said Cruz.

Bradford went in the front with Camila, watching her connect the data cube, to the APC's comms link. She looked at him, waiting for final approval.

"Your choice, but we both know this is too big. Too big to be ignored, but also too big for us to do anything about. Do I send it ?" She asked.

"Send it."

One key to press and the compressed data burst was on its way. Probably received almost immediately, to be decrypted and in Maria's personal inbox, before Camila had started up their APC.

"You know what annoys me most ?" He asked.

"Bad remakes of classic movies ?"

He shared a grin with her, though he was feeling tired and badly needed a few hours sleep.

“Yes, that right up there on my list.” He said. “Mainly I feel a fool for thinking Dimitri was basically alright, just selling his knock off medicines. Now it looks like he’s been arranging half the assassinations in San Pablo.”

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The old bunker was below the police station, which was now just two walls and a front step. The cells were still there, once you’d found the hole in the ground where the stairs had once been.

“We used this as an overflow last year.” Said Maggie. “When a settlement to the south was raided. We had another thirty people here for a while. It was nice, but Roxy said they had to move on.”

“Shit happens Maggie. I’m sure Roxy was just trying to keep you all safe.”

There was graffiti on the cell walls, some of it not very complimentary about Roxy and the other good folk of Desperation. On past the cells and a decent set of stairs, led down to a heavy steel door, which was open.

“Has anyone been here recently ?” He asked.

“Not since the overflow people... That must be over a year ago. They used to explore the bunker and steal stuff... That was part of the problem.”

“Hmmm....Follow me and keep your blaster handy. All sorts of nasty things love dark holes in the ground.”

It was all old, the steel door rusted solid in the open position. The water filters should still work though. The bunkers had been built well, the core systems designed to last for over three hundred years. The only light was from an oil lamp, which he’d given to Maggie.

“The stairs down are in the next passage, right at the end.” She said.

Lots of rooms leading off the passage, with the sound of scuttling coming from most of them.

Scorpions, large spiders, different types of mutated rats, he’d seen them all in such places and things far worse. Most living creatures instinctively avoided contact with man though, but not all.

“There.” Said Maggie.

A door with ‘Maintenance,’ written on it, leading to another set of stairs. There were small bones on the stairs, probably rat bones. They looked to have been gnawed clean of any flesh or sinews.

“Are you alright Maggie ?”

“Yeah, we’re nearly there now.”

“Do you really never miss with your blaster ?”

“No, never.”

“I’ll take the lamp then, so you can cover us. By the look of it, something is hunting the rats. If you see anything big.... Shoot it. If it’s someone we know, we can apologise later.”

The floor was sticky for some reason and there was an unpleasant smell. An odour which mixed up quite a few nasty smells, including mustiness and rotting flesh.

“How far ?” He asked.

“The water purification system is in a separate area, to our right and then about fifty feet down another passage. Oh, I forgot something ?”

Crap, but no point in getting bent out of shape about it. Her face in the lamplight looked so miserable, that he had to try and be nice to her.

“No problem Maggie, you’re doing just great. What did you forget ?”

“Roxy locked the door, to stop the overflow people stealing the copper pipes.”

Damn, it was an unpleasant journey in the dark and he didn’t fancy the idea of having to go back for a key.

“This door, wooden or metal ?” He asked.

“Erm.. Wood, yes definitely wood.”

“Then we’ll be fine. Locks on wooden doors are just there for effect, to deter the amateurs.”

Maggie looked happier, as they found the locked door. Nothing written on the door, but she assured him it was the right one. He leant back and used all his strength and weight, to hit the door with the heel of his boot. The door crashed open, pieces of broken lock falling to the ground. He moved inside the room, the lamp showing him a bank of filter elements and connecting pipes, all intact.

“Now you get to watch for anything nasty.” He said. “While I take all this apart.”

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Bradford had intended to call Maria and arrange a meeting, but she still obviously had a few trust issues. After having no sleep at all, he was having a miserable breakfast, listening to Amoe argue with her mother. He had asked Camila to squeeze her into her place.

“No way Bradford my place is full and that woman.....”

He knew what she meant; Haunani Lee had seemed such a nice sweet lady. That had been in her own home though, with everything just as she liked it. Now she’d become a needy nuisance, trying to control their lives.

“Well..... If you’re going out. Bradford will have to stay at home and keep me company.”

It was almost a relief, when a Class A security message came up on his PD489 comms device.

‘Downstairs.... Now. I’m in the communal garden... Maria.’

He was almost looking forward to some kind of apocalyptic emergency, to get him out of the apartment. Seeing Maria would have to do.

“Sorry, duty calls.” He said.

He closed his ears to the objections, grabbing his jacket and hurtling out of the front door. Four flights of stairs down to the smelly dump, laughingly described as a communal garden. Only a garden if you were growing rubbish and the occasional dumped mattress. Maria was sat on the edge of a concrete plant holder.

“Better than the last time I sat here.” She said. “Then there’d been a burnt out car against the wall.”

“Yeah... the resident association moaned at the landlord, quite a lot.”

He sat next to her, wondering why lush green plants flourished by the side of the expressway, but not in their communal garden.

“You can probably guess why I’m here.” Said Maria.

“Yes, it’s a problem.”

“A huge problem Bradford. We both like Otis Herbert, but his first priority will always be his own survival. If he thinks we’re investigating him, we’ll end up sacked or dead. Maybe even sacked then killed.”

“But we can’t ignore it.” He said.

“No we can’t.... You’re the one at the sharp end... What are you going to do ?”

Of course it had to be him, she didn’t even need to threaten him with a Chinese burn. He had the operatives, while Maria had all that wonderful mass surveillance data.

“Firstly out of common sense and personal survival, I’m going to begin by assuming Otis is innocent. If he’d wanted ‘Call me Doug’ killed, there are people on the street, who’d have killed him for a bottle of Devils Promise.”

“Me included, everyone hated the guy.”

“Yeah, it’s all been too elaborate, too many chances for people to be seen.” He said.

“Just like Jason Cetrone.”

“Exactly... Otis is no angel, but there are self-imposed limits to his villainy. Besides, he had a lot to gain from building houses out in the Badlands.”

She was giving him a look of wonder.

“You actually read my eyes only assessment of Otis, from last year.” She said.

“Yes good reading and we both know Otis would never carry out such a clumsy plan. I’m also ruling out Pastor Ivor, for many of the same reasons. The Pastor would gladly lead an army of liberation, but it would all be face to face. Warriors against warriors....Never assassination out in the arse end of the Badlands.”

“Which just leaves another dozen suspects, at least.” Said Maria.

“I’m always suspicious of anyone who turns up with just the right piece of information, just when you need it. Pastor Ivor’s daughter I mean, Marie. There was a price involved of course, but one I’d have gladly agreed to anyway.”

The garden was quite pleasant, the perfume of the few blooms, offsetting the stink of rotting rubbish. Next time though, he’d ask Maria to meet him in the car park.

“What was her price ?” Asked Maria.

“The life of her father..... If the worst ever happened.”

“Did you agree ?”

“Yes, I promised to help him.”

“Will you keep that promise ?”

“Yes.”

She kissed him on the cheek, before holding his hand for a fraction on a second. They must have looked like two teenagers out on a date.

“I think Marie might have played me.” He said. “I’ll get her picked up and sweat her a little.”

“Really ?”

Her look had changed, as if she wanted to take her kiss back.

“Well, not me personally. I’ll get Camila to drive her out into the Badlands and give her an ultimatum. Talk or walk home.”

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They do say we each have a guardian angel, though Hector suspected that his had been on vacation for a while. His angel was probably lying on a poolside lounge somewhere hot, with a Mai Tai in his hand. A guy of course, the local priest had once told him all angels were men. Then he’d received a beating for saying that sounded a pretty fucked up way to organise heaven. Hector was having a little good luck, or maybe his guardian angel had become fed up with drinking Mai Tais. He’d just removed the last water filter element and only had a few pipes left to disconnect.

“Stop putting your back towards the dark corridor Maggie.”

“If I do, I can’t cover you, while you’re working.”

“Don’t worry about me, I’m too mean and miserable to make good eating for anything down here. You turn a little and watch those corridors.”

“Fine.”

The first piece of good luck was Maggie taking no notice of what he’d said. She did look into the darkness, but half of her attention was still on him. The second piece of good luck was her aim, which had never been as good as she’d boasted. Everyone lies though, especially if they want to be invited on an exciting mission.

“There’s something moving Jared.” Said Maggie. “Something big and heavy.”

“Where ?” He asked.

It looked as though her military grade blaster was aimed at him. He even felt the hairs on the side of his head get burned, as Maggie fired. There was a loud shriek, as though her blaster had hit something large and nasty. Maggie fired twice more, before using the night site on her weapon to examine what she'd fired at.

"I think it's dead." She said.

"What the fuck did you kill Maggie?"

The water filters forgotten for a while, he took the oil lamp over to the creature she'd killed. The front claws made it look like a scorpion, but the rear end resembled a bear, or maybe even a large possum.

"Did you ever see anything like that?" Asked Maggie.

"No never... Crap Mags, that thing is as big as I am. Heavy too by the look of it."

"Do we drag it back?"

"No, we'll finish getting the filters and tell Roxy about it. If she wants to see it, she can come and have a look."

"There might be others Jared."

"If there are we'll do something about it, but not today."

Not with her around, but he wasn't going to say that. The creature looked big and dangerous. There'd be others like it of course, that was how nature worked. He'd come back and take care of them, but with a large group of heavily armed adults.

"Just two pipes, then we'll go back." He said.

No corrosion, the filtration system had been well made. The pipes easily came away and were added to two sacks he'd brought for the purpose.

"I'll take one." Said Maggie.

He was handing the lighter of the two sacks to her, when Maggie vanished. The lamp went out, Maggie gave a short scream and he was alone in the dark. His first thought was that she'd stepped back into a hole in the ground.

"Maggie !! Are you alright?" He yelled.

No shouting her name a hundred times, that only happened in bad movies. After the second shout she was either going to shout back, or she wasn't. Hector got down onto his knees. No hole in the ground, but he found the broken lamp and burned his fingers.

"Shit... We should have brought another lamp." He muttered.

Luck again and his fingers found her blaster, the sight still set for night vision. A screen only an inch or so across, but it gave him his sight back. He spun, looking for the dead creature. No, it hadn't survived three Ion blaster hits, it was still dead. He swung the weapon in a wide arc.

"Fuck!"

There was something back up the corridor, something in a bundle on the floor. He crept forward, picking up the jacket Maggie had been wearing. There were a few drops of blood on the collar. No going back for reinforcements, he stood up and followed a trail of small blood droplets. Hector had promised to bring the kid back alive and he was going to do it. Or die in the attempt.

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