

Bradford II – Badlands

Chapter 6 - Caught

“Marie and her expensive clothes fitted in at the old cathedral, with its mixed crowd of the genuinely poor and the wealthy middle class, who thought of it as cool place to be seen. The girl had probably never seen the Badlands before and actually jumped, as the van’s headlights went out.”

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There had been so many biological and chemical weapons used in the brief war, that Hector often thought it was a miracle any members of the human race had survived. The oceans must have been contaminated and there had been stories of strange things washed up by the tide. All dead of course, mutations too extreme to survive. There had been human babies too, abandoned by their mothers, left to die in the Badlands, exposed to the elements. People had understood and didn’t judge. Little was said about that dark period, most simply happy if their children were born without deformities.

“Bugs breed faster than us, several generations being bred in a year.” He’d been told once, by one of Samuel’s science guys. “That’s why there are so many mutated creatures out in the Badlands. Though something else happened there too, something we don’t fully understand.”

The people in the towns and cities moaned about skin bugs, but they were only the forerunners of what was to come. Hector had seen the strange scuttling things in the Badlands and knew they’d enter San Pablo one day.

“They’re harbingers of our eventual doom.”

Gillian McBride had told him, while she’d checked over his recent surgery. Hector didn’t agree with her of course, mankind would find a way to halt the tide of mutated bugs. It was why mankind was top of the food chain, we adapted.

“People will get hungry and eat the damn bugs.” He’d told her.

She’d laughed and told him that deep fried locusts were already on sale in San Pablo. Not as food for the poor, but as a luxury item for the wealthy. Covered in a sauce created by a top chef of course.

“I don’t think anyone will want to eat these.” He muttered.

The creature in the night sight looked like an oversized scorpion at the front. Its rear end looked like a possum or something similar though, right down to the fur on its legs. Could those kind of creatures cross breed ? Hector didn’t think so, but he was no expert. He aimed at its head and fired the blaster, watching the creature collapse to the ground and die. It was a lone monster he’d spotted in a corridor, but if the others went down so easily, he hoped to recover what was left of Maggie. Alive would be nice, but the creatures didn’t look like vegetarians.

“Roxy is going to be so pissed at me.”

He stopped next to the thing he’d just killed, running the sight over it. As big as he was and perhaps heavier. He’d never seen anything like it, but new horrors were constantly wandering out of the Badlands. There had been a crocodile with two heads once, caught alive and displayed as an oddity at the city zoo.

Hector heard the scuttling sound coming from the room ahead, just before he heard a human voice. Only very quiet, but it had sounded like a girl whimpering. Maggie, it had to be her and if she could still whimper, she was alive. He took a step forward and noticed the charge indicator change on the night sight. The blaster was showing 87% most of the time, but occasionally flashing up 15%.

“Crap.” He mumbled.

He had wondered how a kid in the arse end of nowhere had ended up with a top of the range military blaster. It was faulty, of course it was. Hector was about to enter a room likely to be full of overgrown scorpions, armed with a blaster that might be fine, or fire just twice. He should have known of course, just about all equipment in the Badlands was crap. His own Henriksen was pretty good at stopping people, but it had no night sight and would probably just annoy the overgrown bugs.

“Get it done Hector, get the job done.” He mumbled.

Creatures who inhabit dark places, rarely see that well. They probably hunted by sound, feeling the vibrations he’d made working on the water filters. Hector sniffed his right armpit and hoped they didn’t hunt by body odour. Two more steps and he was at the room door, trying to make no sound at all. He ran the night sight over the room.

Crap ! There were a lot of them, some huddled together in clumps. Did they mate, have eggs ? He had no real idea, but several groups of the creatures, seemed to be writhing about and up to something. The night sight found Maggie, still alive and up against the wall to his left.

“No.”

Her voice was faint, as she pushed one of the creatures away. Its place was taken by another, who seemed to take a bite out of her arm, causing Maggie to whimper again. The damn things appeared to be eating her slowly, a bite at a time.

“Fucking things.” He yelled.

They’d heard him, lots of snapping claws turned towards him. Maggie had heard him too. She was still strong enough to try and shove the creatures off her. Hector fired the blaster, praying that it lasted long enough to get Maggie out of the room.

“Come to me, can you walk ?” He asked.

“Yes, I think so. The bastards are going to get this first.”

She was up on her knees, fiddling with something that was attached to her belt. It came free, a canister grenade of some kind. Phosphorous probably and likely to be cheap army surplus. The grenade might go off in her hand or not go off at all. No use telling her to stop, she had the pin out too quickly, throwing it towards the creatures writhing about at the back of the room.

“Strange brutal Gods of my ancestors, don’t let me down now.” He muttered.

Hector closed his eyes, put his hands over his face and waited. As the grenade went off, he could see the bones in his fingers through the skin and muscle. The creatures actually screeched, as the bright light stung their eyes and rendered them blind for a while.

“Get up Maggie, we’re leaving..... Now.”

He had her up, firing twice at the bugs closest to her. She moved quickly, despite having several nasty looking wounds. No need for the night sight now, the room was lit by piles of burning monsters.

“Sorry Maggie, but I’ll need to run.”

Hector had her over his shoulder, hearing her object to being carried like that.

“I can’t breathe Jared.”

Who the hell was Jared ? In all the confusion he’d forgotten it was his own alias. He ignored Maggie’s moans, firing his blaster again at one of the creatures who was still moving towards them.

The blaster didn’t go through its recharge routine, it died, the night sight going dark.

“Fuck ! Hold on tight.”

He remembered the layout of the bunker from his time in Desperation. Not perfectly, but the burning bugs gave him some light to see by. He went up on his toes and ran, as though the devil himself was after them.

"The filters....." Said Maggie.

"I'll come back with Roxy." He said. "She always loved a good fight."

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Bradford had a secure link to President Otis Herbert. Maria would have probably been highly agitated by the call he was about to make, but what the president said, or didn't say, was likely to be worth more than months of routine intelligence gathering.

"Stay and listen Roland, I'd appreciate your thoughts on the conversation." He said.

Otis worked to a schedule, which Bradford had learned almost by heart. If a call was going to arrive from the president, it tended to be just as Roland was bringing in that morning's coffee and flapjacks. The red phone hadn't rung, but Otis would be in his office, looking at the morning news and looking up his personal approval ratings. President Otis Herbert currently had a 94% approval rating, a record. Bradford picked up the red phone and pressed the single button on it.

"Good morning Mr President, is this a good time to talk ?"

"A perfect morning Bradford, no one in the media is after my blood. How is that delightful wife of yours ?"

"She's doing fine. Her mother is staying with us, probably until after the birth."

Bradford was praying Haunani Lee would soon be living somewhere else, but he was keeping those feelings to himself.

"Good, good.....Always nice to chat Bradford, but I'm sure you had something to ask me ?"

Here it came, the question that might lead to him being found dead, or simply sacked. Roland was listening intently, using a set of headphones linked to his comms unit.

"This is probably an oversight from the bad old days, but we don't seem to have a vetting file on one of your staff. Someone who has been with you for over a decade, but seems to have fallen through the net."

There was that small cough, a sure sign that Otis was unhappy. Bradford doubted if he could have faked it, even if he'd wanted to.

"Bradford, we both know that President Jaconelli was assassinated by his PA. Someone who'd worked for him for nearly thirty years. Everyone needs vetting, anyone can be infected by the lies of the subversives. I'm not happy Bradford, not at all. Who is this member of my staff ?"

"Jason Mr President, Jason Cetrone."

The line went quiet for a few seconds. Otis had been sat in the president's office, watching him talk to others. The President tended to stare at the ceiling, while he thought things over.

"I'm not impressed Bradford, you or Maria should have picked this up. Has he ever been security vetted ?"

"No Sir, he seems to have been missed."

Or deliberately marked as 'leave alone' by Otis. Bradford wasn't picking that up though, the president sounded genuinely pissed off.

"Do it right away Bradford, but do it discreetly. The opposition would love something like this, anything to make me look stupid. Do it and send me a copy of the report."

No goodbye, the president just ended the call. Bradford ran through the conversation, as he drank some of his coffee and nibbled at a flapjack.

"Well, what did you make of that ?" He asked Roland.

"I can think of two or three good people to do the vetting." Said Roland. "Not something to subcontract to Bobby Laszlo and his people, far too sensitive. We need to keep this in house."

"I agree, but you know that isn't what I was asking. Tell me Roland... Was Otis faking it?"

Poor Roland, he still had a little blind obedience and respect left in him for authority. Bradford had tried to cleanse most of it out of his PA, but old habits die hard.

"Come on Roland, this is like pulling teeth. There's only the two of us here and I'll never repeat what you say. Out with it?"

"I picked up mild but genuine annoyance and a little apprehension." Said Roland. "He seemed genuinely worried about Jason not being security vetted. I'm no expert, but I'd say that whole conversation was a surprise to the president."

"I think the same, but someone must have deliberately issued a 'hands off' notice for Jason Cetrone. Start looking back through the records and I'll ask Maria to look back into the central registry. All carefully and discreetly done of course."

"I will but it was all paper records in the past. Actually much of the really important stuff still is on paper only. A deliberate policy after the cybercrime epidemic." Said Roland. "There have been fires though and records have been destroyed."

"I know, we arranged one in our own basement." Said Bradford. "All those requisitions for equipment sold on to Bobby."

Did Roland actually grin at him? Bradford was sure he had.

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Camila was sat in the back of one of her company vans; there was even her company moto on the side, 'Making San Pablo Clean Again.' The vans were everywhere, which made them invisible to passers-by. It also made them the perfect way to abduct anyone Camila wanted to talk to. Her Hyenas were too well known though and people would remember seeing them, if Marie was never seen again.

"Don't stay in the old cathedral too long Javier." She said. "Just find Marie and tell her a friend from Longmont is waiting for her outside. If she asks, mention being paid ten Herbert's to give her the message."

"Supposing she asks me to describe him?" Asked Javier.

Javier Pavuls wasn't ideal for the job, but he was a relatively clean face. He'd been arrested as a juvenile for a few minor offences, but so had two thirds of the population in the Eastern Districts. Dating her daughter brought its own problems, but he'd handled a few tasks quite well.

"Act indifferent and mean it." Said Camila. "Say you got your ten dollars, so she can come or not. Tell her you don't give a fuck."

"Really?!"

"Yes, I guarantee she'll follow you outside."

"What then?"

"Cruz and I will deal with her. You just get in the back of the van."

Javier wasn't the smartest, but he had an honest face and it was a fairly simple task. She watched him go inside the old cathedral, at just about the time Pastor Ivor usually gave his evening sermon. All the faithful would be inside the cathedral, waiting to hear words of wisdom and get a free meal. Camila waited a good ten minutes, before leaving the van.

"All inside, waiting for their food." She told Cruz. "We'll wait close to the side door."

There was a certain skill in hiding in amongst the shadows, without looking sinister. For a big guy, Cruz handled it well, as she moved closer to him. To a casual observer, they'd look like a couple sharing a quiet moment.

"I don't care lady.... Wish I'd never taken the money....."

Javier doing his pissed off routine and doing it well. A woman was slowly following him outside. A pretty mixed race face, topped by long dark hair. The trim body and expensive clothes marked her out too, as the woman they were after. It was all too easy, Marie actually approached them.

"Yes ? You're not my usual contacts."

Oh, God protect stupid amateurs. A confession in her first words to them. Camila had expected so much more from a child of Pastor Ivor.

"Sorry." Said Camila.

They'd done it before, too many times according to Bradford. Cruz held the young woman tightly, a hand over her mouth. Camila injected a dose of anaesthetic into Marie's neck. Enough to make the girl sleepy and easy to handle, but not enough to do her any harm. Their usual targets had been rival gang members, who were rarely seen again.

Javier was already in the van, as they placed Marie inside and propped her up with a few cushions. That wasn't part of their usual routine, but Marie wasn't their usual type of abductee. The driver came round and closed the van doors and there was still no sign of an angry mob outside the old cathedral. The van drove off, the driver knowing their destination was deep into the Badlands.

"That was amazing." Said Javier. "We got her, without anyone noticing."

"That's Pastor Ivor's kid." Said Cruz. "Anything bad happens to her and war will break out in San Pablo. Keep your mouth closed about this, ok ?"

"Ok."

Camila smiled at Javier, the boy had done well. Cruz was right though, they had to make sure nothing linked them to Marie's abduction. Just in case the girl ended up at the bottom of a seismic hole in the Badlands.

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Roxy had been involved in settling a dispute with a visiting trader and then Maggie had needed her wounds cleaning and bandaging. There were the questions too, far too many for his already low tolerance to pointless crap.

"Is Maggie going to be alright ?" He asked.

"Should be, she's got age on her side." Said Roxy. "The young ones seem to heal quicker."

"Then we should go and kill those things." He said. "No more endless questions...We need to go back to the bunker and clear them out. The filters are still there too, all bagged up and ready to go."

"Fine, though I'm still not happy that Maggie came back half eaten." Snapped Roxy.

Half eaten was a huge exaggeration, but he let it go. He was the new guy, the outsider and Maggie was one of them. He understood the tribal moods of such places and knew he was in for a few days of getting the stink eye from everyone. At last Roxy finally chose half a dozen of the good people of Desperation, making sure they were all armed to the teeth.

The room was empty of any live creatures by the time they were ready and had clambered down into the bunker. Dead ones were there though, some looking chewed at by the rats.

"The rats have been getting their revenge." He said.

"Good job there are a few dead ones, or I might not have believed your story." Said Roxy.

"There's Maggie's blood, right where he said." Said Jim.

Jim was one of Roxy's personal team, who seemed to follow her everywhere. Hector was still getting to know the current inhabitants of desperation, but he knew Jim from way back. Bob was there too, shining his light into a hole in the wall.

"They came in through here." Said Bob. "Easy to fill up with rubble, but they'll just dig through somewhere else."

"We'll need to include the bunker in our daily patrols for a while." Said Roxy. "Most bugs avoid places people use regularly, even huge strange bugs."

Hector turned over one of the dead creatures. It really did look like Mother Nature had stuck the front end of a scorpion, onto the rear of a monster possum. It had red blood though and it had died fairly easily, so he didn't think the bugs posed a serious threat to the settlement.

"We'll do a sweep of the entire bunker." Said Roxy.

Her people seemed fairly well disciplined, but it was already getting late and most of them had probably already gone out on their regular patrols. No one actually moaned, but there were a lot of sighs.

"Hey people." Said Roxy. "Once we get back home with the filters, Jared has promised us water that isn't stained by rust."

"Is that what the colour is?" Asked Jim.

"I fucking knew we were drinking rusty water." Said Bob.

For some reason Jim thought that was funny and laughter is contagious. A far happier group of people carried out a thorough search of the entire bunker. They found no more live bugs, but they did find Maggie's jacket and the two sacks of filters and pipes.

"You'll have clean water in the morning." Said Hector.

He was tired, or he might have noticed the strange look Jim was giving him and the way Bob was avoiding talking to him. Hector ignored it all and just thought about getting under his blanket for two or three hours of much needed sleep.

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Gillian McBride liked Tamara, she always had. Even towards the end, when Labsync4 had been invaded by uniformed men carrying guns, Tamara had been calm, always a smiling face and very good at networking to get things done. Gillian had high hopes for Tamara, which went well beyond a bit of hand holding for Bradford.

"Wow, most of the equipment is better than we had in the old place." Said Tamara.

Always the old place and never any use of the name Labsync4 or Mike Lakey, the dead CEO who had owned Labsync4. Gillian knew others who had a similar aversion to using the names from the bad times. Almost as if by naming the devil, he might actually appear.

"There is no formal equipment budget, but Bradford always manages to obtain anything we need." Said Gillian. "He's currently flavour of the month with President Herbert, especially after that TV documentary."

"I saw that.... So cool."

"Have you got somewhere to stay in San Pablo?"

"Yes, Roland found me somewhere." Said Tamara. "It's only temporary, but it's quite close work and it's clean."

"Good, Roland has a knack for looking after people."

"He's quite good looking..... Is he..... You know?"

Oh dear, she'd forgotten about Tamara breaking every male heart in the days when they'd all worked for Mike Lakey. It had been fun to watch, but probably hell for the poor guys. At least Roland wasn't likely to fall for Tamara's baby blues eyes and smile.

"Ahhh.... Roland is taken....A six foot tall dark haired guy. You might see him outside in reception some nights, waiting for Roland."

"Oh, such a waste."

Gillian saw it more as Roland dodging a very pretty bullet. As it was Tamara's first day in her new job, she just smiled and agreed with her.

"Yes Tamara, such a waste."

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Of course getting the filters to work had been harder than expected. Every job repairing technology out in the Badlands was harder than expected, so perhaps it was actually..... Expected. The pipes had been too short and there was no official stores person in the settlement. Eventually Bob had gutted pipes from what had been the town's cinema.

"Last feature was before I was born." Bob had told him. "I can't see them needing working toilets."

Not that the toilets had worked anywhere in Desperation for a very long time. The people in the settlement had become used to crapping down holes in the ground.

The liberated lengths of copper pipe had needed to be cut and soldered, which had all taken far more time than he'd expected. Or hadn't, depending on how deeply Hector examined the logic of his thoughts. He'd been briefly married once, maybe twice...It had been his Tequila drinking years and many of his memories of those times were hazy to say the least. She'd left him because he was crazy, 'thinking the arse out of everything'. He hadn't really missed her, but accepted that she might have had a point.

"I think that's it." He said.

Hector looked at every connection again, every soldered joint, before connecting the filters to the pipe that led up from the settlement's main well. All the filters and pipes were in a rather dank underground room, so the number of people there did surprise him.

"Still looks yellow." Someone said.

"The filters are dry..... Wait a while." Hector replied.

So intent on looking at the flow of water from the filters, that his sixth sense wasn't kicking in. Never once did he note the way Jim was looking at him, or Roxy. Later he realised of course, but not then.

"Crap, it's looking cleaner." Said Roxy. "Maybe Jared knows his stuff after all."

"Patience people, patience."

Hector waited until the water looked sparkling clean, before filling a cup from the pipe coming out of the filters and into a storage tank. He sniffed the cup before drinking a mouthful. Hector handed the cup to Roxy, who sniffed it the way he had.

"Hmmm, that's an improvement. No slight aroma of old socks."

She drank a mouthful, before quickly emptying the cup.

"So that is what water is supposed to taste like..... Seems a pity Jared, to thank you by killing you, but you haven't been honest with us."

He didn't start asking why six armed men were tying him to a pipe, he already knew. Too many signs that he knew the layout of Desperation, too many careless comments. He liked them though, even old Bob. It gets harder to watch every comment you make, if you like people.

"Get Maggie if she can walk." Said Roxy. "If it looks like we're going to kill him, she deserves to have her say on it."

He didn't say anything, while they waited for Maggie to join them. Some might have hated Roxy for letting him finish fixing the filters, before threatening to kill him. He didn't though, he'd always admired the ruthless streak in her.

Maggie arrived, leaning heavily on a homemade crutch. She wasn't looking at him with hate in her eyes, but she wasn't rushing over to hug him either. Roxy knelt in front of him, placing her blaster against the front of his head.

"What did he say to you Maggie?"

"That Roxy always enjoys a good fight."

Oh, so stupid and that stupidity just might cause his death.

"You know Desperation far too well Jared, for someone none of us know. If you hadn't carried Maggie out of the bunker, you'd already be dead." Said Roxy. "Who the hell are you?"

"He's helped us a lot." Said Maggie.

Well done Maggie, though she was a lone friendly voice. It was a dilemma, as a lot of people wanted to kill Hector Pérez, AKA Crowman. He'd been exposed as a police informer, an instant death sentence to most in the Badlands. Roxy made a point of putting her index finger on her blaster's trigger.

"I mean it ! Tell me who the fuck you are, or your body is going down the nearest hole in the ground."

"It's me Roxy." He said. "I was worried you might recognise my smell or something, after all those times we..... They altered my vocal chords and trimmed a few face bones. Amazing how much you can alter someone by simply pulling their face in a bit tighter.... You must know me?"

He thought he saw recognition in her eyes, as she leant towards him and sniffed a couple of times.

"I just smell stale sweat..... Last chance....Who are you?"

"It's me Roxy, Crowman. Hector you knew me as, Hector Pérez."

"Hector the rat, Hector the informer." Muttered Bob.

Even if he lived, Hector knew that many of the people in Desperation, would never be that friendly towards him. Roxy was pulling his shirt to one side, exposing a small scar, where he'd once had a tattoo.

"They changed everything Roxy." He said.

"Not everything, if it is you Hector." Said Roxy. "Get Maggie out of here."

"No, you can't just kill him.... Like an animal." Yelled Maggie.

"I'm not going to kill him, not yet anyway. I just want to have a look at his dick."

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Marie had woken up when they began bouncing over the bad roads at the start of the Badlands.

Camila had duct taped the girl's mouth shut, when she'd begun to offer Cruz large sums of money to set her free. After he'd killed the others of course.

"Definitely her father's daughter that one." Cruz had muttered.

Camila was currently out of the van and looking over an old building she'd used before. In one corner of the ruined building, there was still the blackened blood stain, where she'd obtained information from a member of the Skulls.

"Perfect place." She said. "I can even hear a few night creatures scuttling about."

"I'll get the girl." Said Cruz.

Had he been tempted by the offer of half a million Herbert's and a place in Pastor Ivor's small but elite guard ? Camila thought he probably had considered it, but realised there was little chance of the offer being honoured, once Marie was freed.

“Tell Javier to wait with the driver.” She called. “And turn the van’s lights off, we’ll make do with the oil lamps.”

There was no need for the boy to see what might happen to Marie. Bradford had left the ultimate outcome of the meeting for her to decide. Another advantage of their current location was the closeness of two large seismic holes in the ground.

“My father will have you all skinned for this.”

Wonderful, Cruz had untapped the girl’s mouth. Camila had intended to leave that until the last possible moment.

“Not a good idea to threaten people, who might decide to cut your throat and dump your body where no one will ever find it.” Said Camila.

Marie and her expensive clothes fitted in at the old cathedral, with its mixed crowd of the genuinely poor and the wealthy middle class, who thought of it as cool place to be seen. The girl had probably never seen the Badlands before and actually jumped, as the van’s headlights went out.

“Where do you want her ?” Asked Cruz.

“Anywhere, just keep her pretty dress away from the blood stains.”

By the time he had propped Marie against the far wall, she’d stopped threatening them. In the van’s headlights the place hadn’t looked too bad. The yellow sputtering glow of the paraffin lamps created a far more threatening atmosphere.

“A million and I won’t tell anyone..... A million each.” Said Marie.

Camila exchanged a smile with Cruz. They both knew there was no chance that the offer was anything other than a desperate lie.

“Your daddy got that kind of money ?” Asked Cruz.

“He can get it, he knows people, lots of important people.”

That kind of information was pure gold. Camila decided to ask about the things Bradford needed, but then to add a few questions of her own. Cruz was bouncing a long blade against his leg and Marie looked terrified. The moment to ask for information had arrived.

“You’re not really going to kill me, are you ?” Asked Marie.

“Let me play with her a bit first.” Said Cruz.

“I’ll tell you anything, everything I know.”

Camila believed her and dropped a small digital recorder into the girl’s lap.

“Green button to start, red to stop.” Said Camila. “Don’t tell us a pile of nonsense, we already know some of the names and dates.”

“I won’t, what do you want to know ?”

“We’ll start with names involved in this dirty scheme with Dimitri.” Said Camila. “You’ve already admitted to having contacts in that group. We want the names and their positions within the conspiracy. Times and dates too, of what has already been done.”

“Ok, but I don’t know everyone.”

Marie had already pressed the green button and begun to talk, when Camila interrupted her.

“Future plans too, that’s really important, with dates and places.” Said Camila. “Then we can move on to the people your father knows, the important people.”

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Hector had expected to be killed, or maybe left tied to the pipe until they’d decided what to do with him. Roxy had undone his trousers, pulling them down far enough to see what lurked between his legs. She’d actually laughed, which hurt more than if they’d given him a beating.

“It seems to be hiding at the moment.” Roxy had said. “But I’d recognise that bent dick of yours anywhere Hector.”

“We should still kill him.” Bob had added.

Hector could see the relationship with Bob was going to need some work. The strange thing was how quickly he’d ended up in bed with Roxy, fucking each other’s brains out. They’d gone to Roxy’s nest, where she sometimes went to think things over. Their bed for the night was just three or four blankets on the floor of a cellar, on the far northern edge of town. There was a certain risk to being there, which just added to the excitement. After an hour or so of getting hot and sweaty, he was ready to go to sleep.

“Not many guys can say their dick saved their life.”

He’d thought Roxy had been asleep. It was dark in the cellar, they’d done everything by touch with hands lips and tongues. It was surprising how a day’s sweat and grime didn’t seem to matter, if you were both sweaty and grimy.

“I didn’t expect..... erm this.” He said.

“Neither did I. You feel the same in the dark though and well.... It’s been a while Hector. I’m guessing it’s been a while for both of us.”

“Oh yes, you won’t believe what’s happened to me since we last lay on these blankets.”

He felt her breath on his neck, as she gently kissed his cheek. They’d probably both had other lovers over the years, but Roxy had been a bit special.

“What do I call you now ?” She asked. “Hector, Jared or is it still Crowman ?”

Hector had hated his name, not wanting to ever be Hector again. Yet hearing her say his name again, brought back so many good memories.

“Crowman is dead, the cops even have a death certificate.” He said. “I’d like to be Hector now, just plain Hector.”

“Good, I wasn’t keen on Jared. Why are you here Hector ? Are you still working for PD489 ?”

What to tell her ? Hector realised he needed to trust her and having a place in a regular home in Desperation, would help his work for Bradford.

“If I say yes... Do I go in that seismic hole tomorrow ?” He asked.

Her hand went down between his legs, quickly getting him hard again. They should have both been asleep, the sounds of dawn were beginning outside.

“It would need to be our secret.” Said Roxy. “But I know the cops aren’t interested in Desperation, we’re small fry. I know the Badlands and the groups operating out here. The settlement needs supplies and you need my help.....Does that interest you ?”

“Oh yes, just please don’t stop what you were doing.”

Her hand for a while, before he entered her, lifting her knees to get in good and deep. By the time they were finished, the feral cats on the edge of town were filing the morning air, with the song of their people.

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