

Salvage

Chapter 1

The ruined building groaned ominously and Silver froze in place, holding her breath lest the hundreds of tonnes of twisted metal and broken concrete above her give way. Her heart thundered in her chest, and she counted the beats. Once, long ago, her dad told her that if you got to ten beats then you'd be all right. Within a few seconds, she had reached the number and the rubble above remained intact. She wondered briefly whether her dad's heart had ever reached ten beats as quickly as hers just had.

'You still with us, Sil?' The deep voice of her partner Coal sounded distant. She shifted slightly and raised her head to look around. Illuminated from the light built into the side of her gas mask, the air around her had taken on a smoky quality from the dust that had been disturbed. The beam of light revealed broken concrete, the twisted mess of metal reinforcing, and a few other odds and ends. She imagined she could taste the grit in her mouth, smell the mouldering damp of the place, and was thankful for the breathing filter. Apart from the metal, there was little here of value, and not much hope of digging any further into the building.

'Yep, I'm okay,' she called belatedly. 'Not much here though.'

She reached down to her thigh, which was no easy task in the cramped space, to pull forth the compact saw stowed there in a pocket sheath. With the saw free in hand she rolled carefully onto her back to get better access to the fingers of metal clawing down from above. The light revealed a couple of black cockroaches staring down, incredulous at her for disturbing their home. She brushed them away with her gloved hand, used to them by now. Roaches were perhaps the most prosperous of creatures still living in the Badlands.

'Just taking all the metal I can,' she called out to Coal, before setting to work with the small hacksaw. The serrated blade was sharp and cut fairly easily through the finger-thick pieces of metal, though it grated and squealed loudly in the process. Despite the keenness of the blade, it was vigorous work and after a few minutes Silver was breathing heavily and sweating inside of her overalls. Each time a piece of metal came away, she would tuck it into a hessian sack she carried with her. It was far from the most valuable material she had retrieved from the Badlands, but it would fetch a price nonetheless, and keep her place within the crew.

After a few minutes more she had cut away everything she was likely to get and carefully slipped the blade back into its pocket, making sure to secure the clasp.

'All right, pull me out Coal,' she called, rolling back onto her stomach in preparation for backing out. A rope fed through loops in her overall legs would enable Coal to pull and assist her as she carefully backed out of the rubble. It could also be used in an emergency, if something happened to her while inside the ruins.

'Coal?' she called again, after waiting a few moments for the rope to pull taught. A few breaths more and still nothing. 'Coal! Get back here!'

Her shout yielded nothing, the only sound her breathing within the cramped space. With no help forthcoming from the rope, she started to edge her way backwards the way she had come, but froze at what sounded like a gunshot from somewhere nearby.

'Fuck!' she cursed. Awkwardly, she reached for the small gun strapped into a holster over her shoulder. Before she could loosen the clasp, the rope around her ankles suddenly pulled tight and she was jerked violently a metre or so backwards. She gasped in pain and sparks erupted behind her eyes as her head struck a piece of concrete that was jutting out.

Fighting through the stars that clouded her vision, she found herself being dragged roughly towards the tunnel mouth. Frantically she reached out for something to grab onto, her fingers finding an edge of rubble. Her progress halted for a moment, but another violent tug ripped the piece out of her grip and continued to drag her inexorably toward the entrance of the tunnel.

Desperate now, she glanced back and could vaguely see a number of legs standing at the tunnel entrance. Though she couldn't make out much detail, she knew what they were: the mutated and sickly creatures that occupied the Badlands.

"No!" she screamed out as another tug dragged her closer towards them. Mutes hated those who dwelt within the protection of the Dome, and if they got their hands on her she was dead -- or their dinner.

Her right hand found another perch and grabbed on, while her left fumbled with the securing clasp that held the saw in place. Eventually her fingers cooperated and got the clasp open. Before she could pull the blade free, another violent tug caused her to lose her grasp and she was dragged another metre closer to the mutes.

No longer clasped in place, the blade fell from its pouch with the next pull, tumbling to one side. She twisted to reach for it, her fingers teasingly close to the handle. The next pull jolted her

further along, taking her out of reach of the saw.

She rolled over onto her back and tried pulling up with her legs, kicking and straining to loosen herself. Her efforts were futile, with the rope and her pants well made and unforgiving.

It was only then that Silver remembered the gift Coal had recently given her. She reached inside her overalls, down between her cleavage where she had fashioned a pocket to keep it concealed, and pulled forth a flick-knife. Clicking the release button, the sharp metal blade swooshed free of its beautiful engraved wooden casing. With the muscles in her legs straining against the continued pull of the rope, she reached down in the confined space and began feverishly sawing at the rope.

She was now only a couple of metres away from the entrance of the twisted tunnel, and could make out the legs of at least a dozen mutes crowded around. There was no sign of Coal or the rest of her crew. As she continued to saw, one of the mutes lunged into the hole towards her. Its skin was pale and sickly in colour, a pasty yellow white. Its body looked malnourished, eyes sunken within their sockets, greasy black hair hanging thin and limp.

Desperation lent her strength, and with a snarl, her blade cut through the last threads of rope and she was free. Silver scabbled backwards away from the mute, but the creature darted forward and she felt its cold, bony fingers close on her ankle. She fought and kicked against the grip, but the cramped surroundings hampered her efforts, and the mute's grip proved surprisingly strong. Soon she found herself being pulled towards the tunnel entrance once more.

Reaching under her arm, she fumbled with the clasp that held her gun in place, eventually ripping it free. Twisting onto her back, she sighted the mute down the length of her body. The creature's eyes widened as it saw the gun pointed its way and it let out a pitiable moan, but its grip did not slacken. Closing her eyes, Silver squeezed the trigger and the shot reverberated deafeningly in the confined space around her.

Blood splattered over her pants and boots, and the grip on her ankle loosened as the mute slumped, lifeless. Finally she was able to scramble back deeper into the tunnel. Only once she reached the spot where she had cut away the metal earlier did she pause for breath and to assess the situation. Her head hurt where she had banged it, and when she reached up to touch the spot, her hands came away wet with blood. A panicked sob escaped her lips as the gravity of the situation dawned on her. She was injured, separated from her crew and stuck inside a collapsed building deep in the Badlands with a bunch of hostile mutes waiting for her to emerge.

'Fuck you, Coal!' she screamed, throwing the full weight of her panic into the curse. 'How could you leave me?'

Her voice sounded hollow and tinny through the mask, the clear plastic fogging slightly from the outburst. Her heart thundered almost audibly in her chest, her lungs straining under the pressure of her quick, shallow breathing. Bracing herself against the wall of the tunnel and sitting up as best she could, Silver forced herself to concentrate on breathing, fighting for calm.

'Okay, get a grip, Silver,' she said to herself, talking out loud to help retain her calm. 'We never leave a man behind. Never leave a man behind.'

It was a mantra she had first heard her father say years earlier, and one she had heard repeated many times since by other crewmembers. Her crew would not leave her, so she needed to concentrate on getting to them. Sheathing her knife but keeping her gun to hand, she gingerly raised her hand to her head again. This time the wound felt wet, but gummy, indicating the bleeding was starting to slow. Looking herself over, she could see that her arms were covered in cuts and scrapes, but nothing that looked too serious. Her overalls were a mess, but the blood splattering them was not her own. Satisfied she had no serious injury concerns, she turned her attention to her equipment. Her cutting blade was gone, but everything else appeared to be in place. She considered starting back down the tunnel to retrieve the saw, when the sound of two distant gunshots caused her to freeze, head cocked to one side.

A few agonising seconds ticked by until a third gunshot confirmed that someone was nearby. The sound galvanised her into action and, slipping her gun into its holster, she pulled herself further along the passage, poking her head into spaces that at first glance appeared to lead nowhere. Her efforts were soon rewarded as she spotted a hitherto unseen space above her. The entrance was narrow and would be a tight fit, but looked promising beyond if she could squeeze through.

With a glance back the way she had come to ensure no mutes had decided to risk venturing in after her, she began manoeuvring herself up into the space above. Her muscles strained as she held her arms up to narrow her shoulder width, and pressed upwards into the tight space. It was extremely claustrophobic, and at multiple stages she found herself jammed in place. But she had plenty of experience at climbing through tight spots, and she knew the trick was to stay calm and keep working to find the few millimetres that would allow her to squirm her way forwards.

After a couple of minutes of twisting and straining, she pulled herself clear of the tight

squeeze. Above, there was a little more room, with a large concrete slab having fallen against another, leaving a triangular space under it. There appeared to be some room to her left so she crawled along the space and found that a narrow way continued, leading inexorably up.

'Not ideal, but better than the alternative,' she muttered as she continued to squeeze her way along. Eventually, she detected some daylight filtering down from above and switched the light in her mask off. Making an effort to move a little more quietly now, she dragged herself towards the light and cautiously poked her head out of the entrance.

The light of day was a sickly yellow, weak from the dirty fog and haze, which was normal for the Badlands on a windless day. Silver was again thankful for her mask, the air quality outside no better than the mould and dust-filled air below. She had emerged just below the peak of the twisted ruin, and must have come out on the opposite side from where she had entered as there was no sign of mutes or other movement below. She eased herself out of the crawl space and, perched on top of a jagged piece of concrete, drew her gun. She was perhaps twenty metres above ground level, the rubble-strewn side of the ruin descending steeply down to the tarmac. She eyed the slope, concerned less about getting down and more about doing so quietly.

Poised to begin the descent, she instead changed direction and edged her way to the right. Keeping low to the concrete below her, she cautiously edged around, peering past a large piece of plastic piping so she could get a view of the mutes.

There were fourteen of them in all, mostly males, but some women and youths among them. All were clustered around the tunnel entrance, crouched around something on the ground. She bit back a horrified gasp and her hand flew to her mouth as she realised it was a body, and they were feasting on it like a pack of wild animals. As she watched, one of the mutes raised its head, a string of bloodied flesh hanging from its chin and her stomach rebelled, causing her to retch.

Some of the other mutes raised their heads at the sound and she pulled back behind the cover the pipe offered, panting heavily and squeezing her eyes shut against the image. 'Coal!' she whispered under her breath, her voice full of anguish. She knew there was nothing she could do for him now. All that was left for her was to try to get back to the rest of her crew and make sure they were okay. Together they could come back for his body.

Wiping her mouth, she backed away from her perch, keeping low initially. Once she was sure she would be out of sight, she stood and abandoned stealth, making her way down the opposite

side of the pile as quickly as she could manage. She had not heard any more gunshots, which left her concerned that the other crewmembers were in trouble, or had retreated back to the trucks. Either way, she needed to hurry back. Rubble skittered and clattered down the pile, loosened from her passage.

Reaching the bottom of the ruined mess, she took off at a run along the bitumen remains of the road. Debris from the collapsed buildings had spilled out across it in places, along with fallen power poles. Time and nature had also taken its toll, with sickly yellow-brown coloured weeds and small bushes pushing up through cracks and holes in the road. As she ran for the truck at full pace, she vaulted over debris that had spilled onto the road, including large red block letters--“We”--all that remained of some retail outlet long gone.

The sound of engines starting caused her to break into a sprint. She took a left and ran another block, as the sound of the trucks started to recede. She put on a last burst of speed to round the final corner, but was too late, glimpsing the tail end of one of the trucks disappearing into the fog over a hundred metres away.

‘Hey!’ she yelled, sprinting in the direction they had gone. ‘I’m here, come back!’

But the trucks were swallowed by the fog, the sound of their engines gradually fading away. Silver pulled up, hands up behind her head, gasping for breath. She was alone on the desolate street, surrounded by the smog-enclosed ruins of what was once the central business district of Campbelltown.

She felt her chest suddenly tighten, her breath quickened into whimpering gasps. She felt like she was suffocating within the facemask and fought the urge to tear it off. She forced herself to breathe methodically, fighting down the panic that once again threatened to overcome her. Coal was dead, her crew had left, and she was a long way from the Dome. They had driven out a fair way; a necessity in order to find decent pickings among the ruins these days, with everything close having already been thoroughly worked over. With the day half gone, she doubted whether she could make it back by nightfall. The thought of spending a night alone in the Badlands did little to help her panic.

Nor did the skitter of a stone behind her. She looked over her shoulder and a jolt of adrenalin shocked her body as she saw a pack of mutants rounding the corner. Whoops and screams echoed down the street as the pack spotted their quarry and started towards her, causing icy fingers of terror to scratch down her neck and back. She didn't have enough bullets to take them all down,

and didn't have much hope of outrunning a pack of fourteen. The image of them tearing at Coal's corpse like a pack of wild dogs flashed across her mind, and she imagined her in his place.

She pulled out her gun and, hand trembling ever so slightly, raised it at the mute leading the pack. The shot echoed weirdly across the fog-covered terrain, sounding like multiple shots fired from different locations. Her target stumbled and crashed to the ground and she immediately turned and ran, sprinting down the street away from them as fast as she could. She had heard that mutes were cannibals, and was hoping now that there was some truth to those stories. She kept her gun in hand just in case. If her ploy failed and they kept chasing her, she would save one bullet for herself.