

TORN

BY JARRAD WEBBER

He blinked. White light burst through the cracks in the roof. The darkness quickly snatched up the space the light had briefly stolen. Another flash. This one seemed to flicker with a greenish tinge. The light flickered for a good twenty seconds he figured, enough to illuminate where he spent the twilight. He remained lost in his waking thoughts while staring at the remains of the hab-block he currently occupied.

He had often wondered how to describe the state of the cities. Ruined didn't quite cover it, destroyed was also untrue as most structures still stood. He had decided on torn for lack of a better term. Torn was apt, torn between damaged and ruined. He allowed his eyes to wander over to the wall, or what should have been a wall. It almost looked like a shell had fallen through and blown out the wall all the while keeping the support pillars intact. The room was now lit up with a vibrant blue. Tendrils of electric blue arced across the metal work. It reminded him of a hab-centre he had sheltered in. The pool had still been functioning then by some miracle of human engineering. It was probably gone, now never to be used again. No matter.

He arched his back from his prone state. It wasn't comfortable, but it was the least exposing position. He had long since given away with comfort. The world around him remained still while he rummaged around in his matt-black belongings. Finally his fingers crossed the cold composite plastic he was looking for. Pulling out the water container, he drank deeply. It was one of the last things manufactured before the great east coast factories ground to a halt; the price was still visible, although somewhat faded. The label claimed in large lettering 'Keeps Liquid Cool And Clean', below it 'Guaranteed by the Alliance Council'. It was a good guarantee. It purified water instantly. He had used it for everything, water, alcohol, mineral drinks, and even liquid explosives. Now, it was almost empty, he would have to visit a condenser soon.

It hadn't rained in months, or was it years? He could never keep track of time. His PDA said it was Sunday, but he couldn't be sure. It had been dropped and smashed enough to provide sincere doubts to its credibility. Although the day didn't matter, today was another day closer to the end. He listened for

movement, almost hoping for something to scurry past. Nothing. There was no thunder, there never was. He packed up his gear, slung his weapons across his back and holstered his knives in the eerie silence. He briefly looked at the time. 09:07. He swore, there was never enough time he thought as he checked the doorway. It was clear, again, like it always was. But this time he knew there was someone else. This time he knew there was another living soul. This time, he knew he was in the same city as his prey.

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The machines had already begun their morning cycles. The hum of electricity grew until it permeated the halls. He rolled over and covered his head in blankets in a vain attempt to ignore the softly glowing lights. Moving the blankets only caused the metallic chill of the bunker to grasp him further. He swore at the cold, it was always cold. The life support systems had stopped working years ago. The well fortified bunker doors, inches of reinforced steel and concrete, were left wide open in an effort to avoid suffocation. The cool ozone tang of the air always reminded him of rain, as if taunting him to remember better times. He breathed deeply and at once began a hacking cough as he made his way across the cool tiling towards the bathroom. The luminescent lights in this area were brighter and harsh to look at. In his waking daze he flicked on the nearby display which replied with details of the past night cycle. Various warnings and notes appeared, yearning for attention, but he wasn't in the mood. There would be time for those later. He only checked one module to see if it was still there. It was. Staring at himself in the mirror, he gazed blankly at the scars across his chest and face. Old wounds he told himself.

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He was lost. He knew the general way to go, head west towards the central districts and follow the hum of electricity to his target. But the pre-event maps he had were old and didn't account for time or a lack of vehicle. Most landmarks referred to in the maps were now gone or unrecognisable. He guessed

he was somewhere in the industrial sector bordering both the business sector and the central district. The fact that he was standing in a vast expanse of a factory told him that. The yellowish tinge to the light filtering through the sky lights afforded him minimal visibility. He didn't recognise any of the symbols of trade in this area. With no other options, he decided on heading to the nearest street and looking for old waypoints. Minutes passed in lonely silence as he headed up along the overhead walkways.

He had encountered three proximity devices and one active turret on his way through the previous factories and production lines. The turret had caught him by surprise; he hadn't seen a working one in years. He instinctively dived behind the cover of a shipping crate as it descended from the ceiling, barrel whirring as it began to spin. Rounds spewed forth like a hose, thudding against the metal hide of the crate. Swearing, he primed a grenade and hurled it over the crate towards the incoming fire, detonating on impact. Blistering metal shrapnel, electricity and nano-computer chips perforated the hall. He sat dazed for a moment trying to contemplate what just happened. Shit, he said to himself, that was the last grenade. He felt strangely bare now as he moved through the factory, the only explosives he had now were his makeshift pipe bombs. Just two industrial chemicals, when mixed together, create a low grade explosion. They would barely scar the paintwork if used against a turret. He had almost reached the end of the factory which led onto what was left of a main thoroughfare. Strange, he thought, this factory was strangely devoid of such security devices. He considered this as he continued under the flickering sky lights. Then he heard it growl.

He turned just in time to see the flash of movement as his attacker leapt into him. The force of their collision barrelled him down into the metalwork below. It slashed and clawed at his arm. He barely had time to think as the bared fangs of the attacker snapped inches away from his neck. Kicking out furiously, his knee landed into his attackers ribs forcing the beast off. Unrelenting, the furry attacker shifted positions and attacked again, this time from the left. This time he saw it coming and repelled its renewed assault with a swift kick. The beast yelped and fled back into the shadows. Hurling himself

to his feet, he unslung his rifle and eased it over the now bleeding arm. The area was shrouded in darkness, not even the flashing sky could illuminate the deep shadows. Firing from the hip he turned to seek revenge on his attacker. His bullets did nothing but damage already corroded machines. His attacker was no where in sight. He stood for a moment before slowly backing away towards a higher position.

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He had begrudgingly made his way from the bathroom into the main control room and sat down in his desk and turned on the monitors. Images flickered into life, some out of focus, other a storm of black and white noise. The array of monitors scrolled through information indicated the status of the different modules, machines and progress towards assigned tasks he had set. Covered in the glow of the monitors, he briefly read the main status reports. Same as they ever were. The security tab was flashing, he selected it and it showed a selection of malfunctioning and erroneous devices along the eastern sectors. He sighed, this wasn't the first time that a string of security devices had failed. They were all on the same grid of the network, so if one failed, it reported the others on the same grid as offline as well. It wasn't a perfect system but it generally served its purpose. Strange though, he thought as he drew his finger across the screen, he had been out that way for maintenance just two weeks ago. He really didn't feel like going out to repair them again. It was probably nothing he told himself as he went to fetch his morning rations.

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Firing a burst of shots into the darkness, he retreated as far as he could. He was at the entry to the factory from the street edge. He was trapped. He couldn't move out into the open street for fear of another hidden turret on the wide open street and couldn't move back into darkness of the factory with that thing after him. He hadn't had time to comprehend what it was that attacked him. He shook his head. He knew it couldn't be what he thought he saw. The

last of them, much like himself, should have died out. Another growl from his right, he turned and fired. The bullets hit nothing but air. He swore; he was wasting precious ammo. He positioned himself between the entrance way and the inner factory and waited. He could hear it breathing. He figured it could hear him breathing far better and smell him, his sweat, his blood... and his rations. It gave him an idea. He quickly tore his rations in half and laid pieces of them out in the open and retreated back into cover. He waited.

Silence. The seconds ticked by in agonising wait. The adrenaline that was pumping through his veins now began to fade and he slowly realised his bloody arm was screaming at him in pain. He grit his teeth and continued to wait through the throbbing pain. It was a battle of stamina now, who would give in first, the creatures hunger or his blood loss. Minutes passed as he fought the urge to lower his weapon and attend to his wounds.

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The security command console scrawled another warning.

Weapons fire: Alpha-Fab #141-71.

Distance: <1km

The warning flashed futilely at the empty seat.

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He was losing the battle. The pain in his arm was fading, gradually replaced with a cool numb sensation. His head swirled as sweat and blood dripped off his body. He staggered and crashed into the wall, lowering his gun. He struggled to prop himself up again. A figure emerged from the shadows. The beast had won. Keeping its eyes towards him it cautiously edged out into the open. In a last ditch effort he moved his gun over to his off hand and aimed it at the beast. The creature's muscles were tensed. The slightest wrong move

by either of them and one of them would die. The beast made it to the food. Its black eyes stared into him. He put his finger on the trigger and froze.

He was struck by the sense of awe, due in no small part to his blood loss. In front of him was a fellow predator, like him, one of the last. It was a dog; or it had been. Generations of its kin living in this harsh hell had conditioned it into a vicious hunter. It was large from what he could remember from animals in his childhood, lean and muscled, teeth inches long, fur like thorns, claws sharp. His arm testified to that. It was natural selection at its finest. The two hunters stared at each other. The beast had finished the rations.

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Geared up and weapon casually slung over his shoulder, he was moving down the access way to perform his usual patrol of the bunker. His boots clinked as they echoed down the hallway. Like always, he moved past the door to the laboratory vault but then doubled back. He stared at the status monitor to check it was still there. It was still there, safe. He made sure everything was locked and secure. He fought to urge to go in look at his prize. Often he would spend hours here in the vault just admiring it. He sighed at his ever growing list of repairs and jobs that demanded his attention to keep the bunker from joining the rest of the city in disrepair. He moved onto the next access way and had reached the first bunker door when a whip-crack echoed outside. He knew what that sound was. Running back down the access way, his thumping boots echoed into the cold air.

Crashing into the command chair, he punched in the access code to the security screen. The latest alert flashed back:

Sensor Alert Activated

Turret Class LB-52 –Sector 71 ACTIVE

Target Eliminated.

Turret Class LB-52 –Sector 71 INACTIVE

Camera Log Y/N?

He cursed at himself for ignoring the security notices as he accessed the turret camera recording. Others had come for him and his prize but it had seemed so long ago that they had, he believed he was the last alive. He cursed himself a fool again as the monitor flashed into life with the turrets actions. Then he laughed.

The turret, in a vantage point high above the city street outside industrial sector 71, had activated after its motion sensor was alerted by movement in the street. The camera began recording as the turret's slender barrel traversed through to its firing line and locked on. In a flash the turret fired and released a bolt of light that created a perfectly round hole through the targets head, bringing it to the ground with a sickening thud. He smiled as he reassured himself that he was still the last human left. He then briefly went over the following security notices of non responsive devices and alerts, satisfied that the cause for the problems was now silently lying dead in the street. He played the recording again, partly to amuse himself and partly to reassure himself of his superiority over his domain. He considered it strange however, that it would run out into the open like that. After being so careful not to be seen, why it would take such a risk perplexed him. Desperation, he assumed. It almost looked like it was chasing after something. He leaned closer to the screen as he played it again. Something caught his eye. The dog was chasing something. He zoomed in on the recording just long enough to see the rations thrown out into the street by a hand. A human hand. His went wide with realisation as a loud bang descended him into darkness.

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Grinning to himself in the dark, he admired his work. Although relatively useless against the reinforced metal turrets, the pipe bomb worked wonders against the sensitive circuitry and wires of an exposed power grid relay. The backup power sputtered into life, emergency lighting dotting the halls and access ways of the bunker. At least now he was on an even playing field, with only the emergency power, his prey wouldn't be able to rely on turrets or security devices. That would hopefully allow him to slip in and steal the target

before his prey knew what happened. He looked at the mess of his arm. It was crudely bandaged and numb. He had doused it in antiseptic, swallowed some basic painkillers and wrapped in it bandages on the run. He would need better medical supplies if he was to live much longer. Time was short, if the street turret hadn't alerted his prey to his presence then the power failure would have. He crept down the service shaft and headed for the laboratory. He was climbing out of the service hatch when he heard the sound of a gun cock behind him.

He froze. "Out!" said a voice behind him. He cautiously climbed out, resting his weight on his good arm. "Hands!" the voice boomed. He winced as he forced his bloodied arm to move. He saw his prey for the first time, an older man; old enough to be his father's age. There were scars running across his tired face. His uniform was old military issue, blue and grey camouflage. It was covered in stains. His prey was looking him over as well. His arm, reawakened from its numb slumber by the movement, screamed into life again. He tried not to show the pain on his face. He failed.

"You know you are not the first who tried to take it," his prey motioned towards the lab vault door. "You're not the first but you are probably the last," he said. "Many tried and all failed, so don't feel too bad. I'm not even going to kill you." He paused. "By the looks of you I'll let good old mother nature take that honour," he laughed. "Weapons, supplies... and your water," he motioned towards the containers on his belt, "on the ground then up against the wall." He grimaced as he unslung his weapons and knives. Those weren't important. The water and supplies were. Without them, the hell storm outside would kill him within a week. He unbuckled his water with the other containers and packed them in together. He retreated and pressed his back against the cold metal wall. "You can lower your arm, it looks bad, hope you don't meet up with any more of your dog friends," his prey laughed again as he leant down to pick up his gear. He shook the water container. "Hmm, seems you're out of water," he grinned as he picked up and shook another container. He continued rummaging through the supplies until he came across a slightly different container and shook it. "Well now," he said shaking it closer to his

ear, "This one sounds full." He was still grinning when the explosion tore his face off.

The explosion rang out throughout the bunker. The pipe bomb was as effective at destroying flesh as it was destroying sensitive circuitry. The metal plate tiles were blackened but intact, the same couldn't be said for his prey. He had quickly picked up his rifle and moved forward cautiously kicking away his prey's weapon. The more he approached, the more he realised his caution was in vain. His prey was a mess; his upper body was shredded and burnt. He was still alive, barely. His eyes looked out with bewilderment and fear as he came to realise he was dying. As he approached, his prey feebly motioned towards the lab door with an access card. His prey said something inaudible. He got down closer to the dying man's face and as he took his last breath he whispered, "Keep her safe."

Exhausted and wounded, he moved towards the laboratory door and swiped the card. The door opened with ease and he stood silently, gazing upon the stasis chamber. For the first time in his life he cried. The status display shone:

STASIS SUBJECT: EVE

Status: Human, Female.

Health: 100%

Reproductive: Yes

The human race would survive.