

Between Above and Below

By Claus Holm

To my brother Lars, who is always there for me.

*Life is like a mountain railroad, with an engineer that's brave
We must make the run successful, from the cradle to the grave
Watch the curves, the fills, the tunnels, never falter, never quail
Keep your hand upon the throttle, and your eye upon the rail.*

-Charles D. Tillman

*There are those who look at things the way they are, and ask why.
I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?*

-Robert Kennedy

The bunker

It is easy go down into hell, but to climb back again, to retrace one's steps to the upper air, therein lies the task.

– Vergil

1. Sarah

"But I don't care about some stupid bunker!" Pete said. His voice was turning into the whine that Sarah hated the most. It was also the tone that usually got him exactly what he wanted. She tried to tune him out, and looked out the window as they drove into the parking lot.

'The Sierra Vista Valley missile museum' she read as they drove past the sign.

"I don't care." Tim was sliding the car into one of the parking booths in the lot. It was barely a quarter full, and Sarah guessed at least a few of the cars had to belong to the employees or guides. "Your grandfather worked in a bunker just like this one, I've heard it's interesting, and we are going. You'll have fun once you get in there," Tim said.

"What if I don't?" Pete said.

"Then you'll be scarred for life, or until you get an ice cream afterwards. Come on, I promise it will be fun."

Sarah smiled. Points for dad. He and mom might be divorced, but he hadn't lost his touch.

She opened the door and stepped outside, taking one last sip of her Pepsi. She might as well throw the last of it away before they went inside. No reason to leave it in the car, it would be boiling by the time they came back. The Arizona sun felt hot on her skin, and she knew the car would become an oven without the air conditioning running.

Tim opened Pete's door, and he crawled out. He was small for an eight year old, and his face had gotten freckles from the sun in the last week. He still held on to his game. If he wasn't careful, he'd fall down the bunker stairs and get hurt. She promised herself to keep an eye on him.

"When did grandpa work in a missile silo?" Sarah asked.

"Most of the seventies. He transferred out in seventy-nine, and we moved to New Jersey after that."

"Did he get tired of it?"

"He got tired of the work hours, I think, and the sleeping accommodations." Tim took Pete's shoulder in his hand and turned him towards the entrance. "As you'll see, it's not exactly luxury."

Sarah nodded. "I wish I could have seen it when it was operational, though."

“You wouldn’t have been allowed in, Ripley,” Tim said. “Not even family could come in. It was top secret.”

“I’d have found a way in.” Sarah smiled, when her dad used the old nickname. After she as a girl had seen *Aliens* on TV, Sarah had declared that she wanted to be just like the heroine, played by Sigourney Weaver. That Sarah looked a little like the actress didn’t hurt her determination either – the facial structure and the hair color was the same, and she had promptly asked to get her hair cut in the same way as her new idol. She was sure her mom was pleased that she hadn’t made the same demands when she watched *Alien 3*, where Ripley became bald.

As they went up the steps to the entrance, Sarah cast a glance at the plaque next to the door. *The Titan preservation Project*, it read, followed by a long list of names. She assumed it was the people who had helped restore and maintain the bunker after it had been decommissioned.

The inside of the visitor center seemed very dark and cool after the heat of the parking lot. A gift shop offered several space keepsakes, and shirts, key chains and caps with the Titan logo on them. She even saw some old cans of water and a Geiger counter, with a sign saying “Genuine cold war souvenirs! Straight from the bunker’s storage room.”

She picked up one of the cans of water. It was a dull metal grey, and surprisingly heavy. She weighed it in her hand, considering if she should buy it, but Tim waved at her.

“You can get souvenirs later. They’ll be here on the way out too. And you don’t want to haul it around downstairs.”

She looked at the other people in the lobby, waiting to join the tour, about twenty in all. She fixed on two boys, a year or two older than her. They were busy looking at the protective suit that was in a display case in a corner, one reading while the other looked. They were dressed in identical white shirts and tan shorts, and when the reader straightened up she could see they had to be brothers. Twins, even. They looked almost identical, and not in a bad way – in fact, they were very cute. She giggled to herself, knowing what her mother would think if she had seen the look she had just had in her eyes. “You’re too young to think about that, young lady!” she would say, and most likely give a deep sigh, as if Sarah was the whore of Babylon. Sarah didn’t see what was wrong with being a little boy crazy.

An old couple were sitting on a bench right next to the door marked *TOUR*. The man looked like he was roughly a hundred and fifty years old, and was wearing a cap with a logo she didn’t recognize. Looks military, but it isn’t, she thought. She had long ago learned to tell the various branches of the army, navy and air force veterans apart by the caps they wore, but this one was different. Merchant marine, perhaps.

Behind her, another man started gathering the metal cans of water up from the box they were in. She turned round and looked at him. “Hey, could you leave one for me? I wanted to pick one up when we’re done.” When she took a good look at him, she almost regretted speaking.

He was very tall, skinny and had long hair that fell over his face in greasy strands. Behind the hair, a pair of blue eyes shone with a cool glow, like the pilot light on a gas stove. His face had beard stubble on it in the same blond color as his hair, what looked like a week’s worth of it. His hoodie was dirty, and his pants looked like army surplus.

“Should have gotten one before then!” he said, his voice was a deep rumble.

“Oh, come on, there are twenty of those things! Can’t I get just one?”

“You snooze, you lose. Isn’t that what you kids say these days?”

He pulled the box up into the crook of his arm, and hoisted it towards the register. Sarah cursed under her breath.

The guy bought a ticket with his souvenirs, and proceeded to fill them into his backpack. She watched him with a sour expression on her face. The ticket clerk, a Hispanic-looking girl in her twenties with long black hair and a few freckles, looked over at her, and noticed her reaction.

“Did you want a water as well?”

“Yeah, I did, but apparently he’s decided to corner the market.”

“I have more out back. I’ll get one for you when we get back up.”

Sarah smiled at her. “That would be great! Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. You have to wait, though – we’re understaffed today, and there’s just me to run the place. I’m even going to guide the tour, since Eddie’s sick.”

She walked out from behind the counter and clapped her hands together.

“All right, if everyone could all gather over here, please?”

The various groups of people came closer to her.

“All right, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Titan Project. I’m Gabby, your tour guide for today. Normally, we have people who used to work in the facility when it was open guide the tours, but due to the holiday and some sick calls today, I’m afraid you’re stuck with me. Don’t worry, I am sure I can answer most of your questions.”

There was a mumble around the room, but no one seemed to be dissatisfied. Sarah saw her dad hold Pete firmly around his shoulders. Pete was playing his electronic game, obviously not caring about the lecture.

“What you’re about to see,” Gabby continued, “is the last Titan II missile. It was decommissioned in 1987, and made into a museum. The missile hatch outside is permanently half open and half closed, so the missile can’t fire. The Russians still keep a close watch on it, just to make sure we don’t decide to re-arm it.”

Gabby walked to the front door and turned the lock. She turned a sign that said “BACK IN AN HOUR” around to face outwards.

Gabby waved the group through the back door and outside the building. The old couple came last, the woman helping her husband by holding his arm. His shuffling walk made it take quite a while before Gabby could close the door behind them.

Two women in summer dresses came up and asked the old woman something, probably offering to help her out. She smiled gratefully, but shook her head. The woman shrugged and nodded at them, and then joined the group again.

Sarah looked around at the equipment displayed on top of the missile silo. Bits of the missile's engines, the cranes and pulleys that would be used to arm the missile in time of crisis. They looked bigger than she had ever imagined, and she whistled, impressed.

"Now we're standing on top of the actual missile silo," Gabby said, pointing to an opening covered with Plexiglas. "Through there, you can see the top of the missile. It's one hundred and three feet tall - that's thirty-one meters if there's any metric system people her today - and weighs three hundred and forty-four thousand pounds. It could be launched in just fifty-eight seconds, and could deliver a nine megaton warhead anywhere within a six thousand, three hundred mile radius in thirty minutes. Now imagine that there were eighteen of these missiles ready to go at a moment's notice, twenty-four hours a day. That's an incredible amount of firepower, and it was of course just a fraction of the strategic capabilities of this country."

Sarah moved closer to the opening and looked down at the missile. It stuck up like a steel finger down there, the sunlight making the top shine with a cold gleam. She imagined it suddenly shaking, beginning to fire up and launch, the missile speeding up into the sky, and shivered. She had never lived through the cold war like her father had, and to her it was an abstract threat, something you didn't really worry about, but nuclear war was in her mind still a very real possibility. Just before they had left the motel this morning, she had watched the news and seen another video of the North Koreans preparing for war. The missiles they were getting ready didn't look as shiny as this one, but was probably just as deadly if they were ever launched. Her father had shaken his head and said that he couldn't believe how the North Koreans kept this up. It was just pointless saber rattling. No one would be stupid enough to fire nukes at the United States today.

Gabby was now explaining about the safety procedures the crew of the bunker had to follow, and Sarah walked back to the group. Apparently, there were several phones you had to call in on, to gain access to the bunker. The security had also included multiple cameras, so the crew could monitor who came and went from many different angles.

"Now, those phones were completely close circuit," Gabby said. "When you were inside the bunker, there was only one communications line out - the so-called 'hot line' to the department of defense. If that phone ever rang, the crew had some very strict protocols to follow to launch the missile."

"What if they just decided to run home instead?" one of the twins asked.

"They couldn't. If the alarm went off, the bunker door would seal itself shut to protect the crew. If they opened the door after that, they would potentially contaminate the entire bunker and the rest of the crew with radioactivity. So even if they decided to run, they would be hurting their crewmates. Once you were in, you stayed in."

"But there was an emergency hatch or something, right?"

“Of course. But the risk of using it would be great. Would you want to go outside if the war was just starting, and the bombs were dropping left and right?”

“So were they just supposed to sit there and wait until the defense department called them and said it was okay to come out?”

“Well, the protocol for the crew stated to await further orders before doing anything. Of course, if the world above had ended, those orders would not be coming, so the bunker was equipped to have provisions for a while. Thirty days, in fact, for a crew of six. After that ran out, they would have to go out anyway, and hope that the radiation level had dropped down to a level they could survive.”

Sarah saw some of the group nodding. She thought several of them probably imagined what it would be like to stay huddled inside a hole in the ground for a month, without knowing if the rest of the world was dead or alive.

“If you’ll all make sure to duck your heads, then we’re going to head down into the bunker itself” Gabby said. “Hold on to the railing and walk slowly.” She looked at the old man. “Would you like to take the elevator, Sir?”

The old man shook his head. “No...I can handle it. I can walk.”

“Nonsense.” The old lady took his arm. “We would like to use the elevator, thank you.”

Gabby pressed a button next to the entrance door and a metal grate in the ground opened, revealing a wire cage elevator. She opened the door and gestured for the old couple to get in, and pressed the button inside when they were.

“Just stay inside when you reach the bottom, and I’ll get you in a moment.”

The elevator began lowering, and Gabby waved the rest of the group on. They walked down a steep set of concrete stairs, and through the first metal door. Sarah looked at it as they walked through. It was thick, but nothing special. The second door, however, was twice the thickness of the first. It looked more like an airlock.

They headed down another set of stairs. The temperature began to cool rapidly, the Arizona heat on top giving way to a moist, cool atmosphere. The footfall of the group echoed in the stairwell as they went deeper. In front of her, she saw that Pete had finally seemed to grow interested, and looked around with wide eyes.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, they gathered in a small room in front of the actual bunker door. This was no mere door, however, it was gigantic.

“This is the main door to the bunker,” Gabby said, as she opened the door to the elevator and let the old couple out. “It is over eight feet deep – a little over two and a half meters. It’s concrete, lead shielded and enforced with steel cores, making it weigh over three tons. It would be almost impossible to break it down, or for any radiation to get in. Even if a foreign agent had gotten into the stairwell, he would never be able to open this door without it being opened from inside.”

Sarah let her hand slide gently over the door. It felt incredibly massive. She saw one of the twin boys, as well as the weird water guy, do the same thing.

“Let’s go inside, and see the control room, where the crew worked and waited for the situation that they hoped never came.” Gabby walked ahead, and stepped through the heavy door. “Watch your step when you cross the threshold.”

The group followed, now walking more or less in a single file. The corridor inside was narrow, the ceiling low. It felt like a catwalk and swayed slightly when they walked on it.

“Is this thing suspended?” one of the men asked. He had a mane of grey hair around his head like a halo, but his face looked much younger than the rest of him.

“Yes, it is. In fact the entire bunker is protected against tremors from earthquakes and from the shockwaves from a nuclear impact. It’s been said that the bunker could have a nuke hit as close as three miles away, and still be able to ride it off.”

Gabby turned left and headed down the corridor, entering a lit room at the end. Sarah was only a few feet behind her, but when the rest of the group kept pouring into the cramped control room, she had to move further in. When they finally all had gathered around the control panels in the middle of the room, it felt very cramped indeed.

Gabby stood in front of two chairs, both situated in front of command consoles with buttons and lights on them. Both consoles faced a large boxy cabinet with even more lights on it.

“That’s a computer!” one of the twins grinned. “It must be one of the earliest ones!”

“Actually it isn’t. This model was put in the early eighties, just two years before the Titan project was shut down. Back then, this was very advanced indeed. You should have seen the equipment they used in the earlier years.” Gabby patted the first chair. “This was the mission commander’s seat. The person sitting here was the most important person in the bunker at the time.” She looked at Pete. “Would you like to try and sit in it?”

Pete nodded. Sarah noticed that he now finally had put his game away and seemed to be interested. His face was lit up in a big smile as he sat in the high-backed chair, moving it in to fit with the command console.

“What’s your name?” Gabby asked.

“Pete!” Pete said.

“All right, so Pete is mission commander. The other chair was the Executive Officer’s chair. Both these two officers would be called upon to use a key to launch the missile in a time of need. None of them could do it by themselves.” She looked at Sarah, who aside from Pete was the youngest in the group. “Would you like to be the Executive Officer?”

Sarah shook her head. “No, it’s okay.”

“Hell, I’ll do it!” a muscular man said. He was big and tall, and the chair creaked a little when he sat down. His wife or girlfriend giggled at him as he turned to Pete with a serious face. “I’m ready and reporting for duty, Sir!”

Gabby had obviously not anticipated an adult to take the place, because it took her a second to get back on her track. When she did, she pointed to the big man.

“And you are...?”

“Jonathan Spencer,” the man said. He turned the chair to line up with the console.

Gabby nodded, and Sarah thought she looked like she was trying to get back on script. “So, now we pretend that you two are on watch, when suddenly, the alarm goes off. Now, sometimes the alarm could be set off by other factors. Electrical disturbances, and earthquakes were the most common ones. But the moment the alarm went off, the bunker would seal itself off. The doors would close and lock, and the seals inside would inflate. If it was just a drill, or a mistake, the crew could simply open the door and walk out again, but they had to wait for signal from topside, where the guards would report to them. If, however, the alarm went off at the same time as the phone rang...” She pointed to the red phone hanging on the wall.

“That’s the phone to the Department of Defense?” a short, white-haired man asked.

“Indeed it is. The Hot Line, the only phone line out of the bunker. The topside people used closed circuit cameras and intercoms. Both the mission commander and his Executive Officer knew this if that phone rang, chances was that it was just a drill...but they never knew for sure. They always waited uneasily for that day when it wasn’t a drill, and where they would have to launch the missile for real.”

Gabby walked to a filing cabinet by the wall. The front of it looked more like a old fashioned safe, with a combination lock.

“Now, if we pretend that the alarm has just gone off, the mission commander would get up and answer the phone. He would ask two questions and answer two himself, determining that both parties were indeed who they claimed to be. Those questions were coded sentences that changed week to week. When they had determined that the order was indeed given, the mission commander would be given the code for the filing cabinet. He would unlock it...” she pointed to the big combination lock, “...and take out two keys and an envelope.”

From her pocket she procured two keys. “These are of course just replicas, but they looked a lot like them. He would give one to the Executive Officer.” Gabby handed the keys to Pete and gestured for him to do so. Pete passed Jonathan one of the two metal keys.

“Now, they had to program the missile, and they did that by opening the envelope. In there was a six digit code, and by entering that code into the system, the missile would be aimed against its target and the warhead armed.”

She pointed to a display of six empty fields. “Now, for instance, say they received the numbers “558322”. That could possibly be Moscow, or Beijing, or a hundred other places. Mission commander, please enter the code.”

Pete bent over the keys on his control panel and pressed in the numbers. They appeared in the display. Sarah thought the old style digital numbers looked strange and clumsy.

“Now, just one thing remained. Mission commander, you need to insert your key into your key slot right in front of you. Executive Officer, you need to do the same. These key slots were far enough apart that it would be impossible for one person to launch the missile by himself. You needed two people here.”

When the two keys were inserted, she nodded. “Now, mission commander, you need to give the signal, count down from three, and say TURN! Then turn both your keys to your right!”

Pete counted “three...two...one...TURN!” and twisted his own hand. Jonathan did the same. A large click sounded from the big computers and the numbers in the display vanished.

“There. Now, if this had been real, you would now be hearing the missile starting its engines and in about thirty seconds it would lift off and fly to its target.”

Pete looked slightly disappointed that things were over. He started to get to his feet.

Sarah opened her mouth to ask a question, when a blaring loud siren sounded in the cramped room. It blared once, faded down and started up again at once.

“What the hell is that?” Sarah’s dad asked. He had to shout to be heard. The group covered their ears, several of them looked uncomfortable.

Gabby’s face became deadly pale. “It’s the alarm! But that can’t be, it’s supposed to be disconnected!”

The siren blared for the third time. Suddenly, the room shook slightly, as the stabilizers compensated for a tremble in the earth outside. The shaking got worse, making them sway on their feet.

“Let’s get out of here!” A skinny man in glasses who occupied the spot furthest towards the door to the corridor turned and ran. A few others followed him.

“Wait!” Gabby shouted in vain. “The door...!”

She didn’t have time to finish. A resounding SLAM sounded when the gigantic entrance door to the bunker let go of the clamps holding it in place and slammed shut. The vibration could be felt through the entire complex, and Sarah felt her ears pop a little as the pressure changed. It felt like being in an airplane.

A frustrated shout from the corridor told her that the man hadn’t made it through the door before it had slammed. Sarah looked to Gabby to figure what they should do now, but wasn’t encouraged.

Gabby’s cheeks were almost grey and her eyes large and scared.

Martin grabbed his brother's arm when the door closed. He could feel the pressure change, and figured this was the bunker sealing itself and going to internal air supply. Robin's eyes were wide, not scared exactly – but interested.

"What the hell...?" Martin asked. "What happened, do you think?"

"I'd say either an earthquake or a nuclear attack." Robin's voice was fairly calm, but Martin could feel his excitement in the way his muscles trembled under his shirt.

"Are you serious? A nuclear attack? Really?"

"Korea has been saying they wanted to get at it for a while. What if they did it? What if they launched a missile at us, or several missiles, even? The guide said that this place was disconnected, but maybe there's some kind of backup system that kicks in if missiles are detected."

The guide ran out of the control room, pausing to look at all of them. "Don't touch anything. Stand right here and don't move!" she said before running into the corridor. Martin had no intention of moving, but heard the guide shouting in the corridor to leave the door alone.

"So what? We're trapped here?" he said out loud.

"Maybe the people up in the visitor center will come and let us out." It was the white haired man with glasses that spoke.

"There were no others." The girl with the short hair turned and looked at him. "Didn't you hear Gabby say that she was alone today?"

"So no one can let us out?" Another man asked. He was in his thirties, and his T-shirt had a Microsoft logo on it.

"Well, someone's bound to come and do it. But the question is when."

Martin looked at the girl. She was cute, in a tough way. She put her hand around her little brother, who didn't really seem to have grasped what was going on yet. Their father also stepped up to them.

"Let's go take a look at the door," Robin said. "I have a few questions for the guide." Martin nodded, and followed his brother out into the corridor.

At the door, the guide was trying to calm the man, who had tried to run.

"I'm telling you, Sir, you have to leave the door alone. Even if we could open it, and I'm not saying we can or can't, we don't KNOW what happened outside. "

Martin and Robin stopped a few meters away from the door. The man who had tried to run was skinny and wearing glasses. He looked like he had been close to a heart attack, his face was flushed and sweat was pouring from his forehead down his face, wetting the collar of his T-shirt. From the image of *Les Miserables* on it, Martin imagined the man was a musical fan.

“Yes...I understand.” The man wiped his face with his hand, looking at how wet his hand got. “I’m sorry, I just...I lost it a little, I suppose.”

“That’s understandable,” the other man, who had followed the musical man out, said. “This isn’t exactly something that happens every day. But we’re going to be okay. Trust me.”

The guide looked at him with a thankful look. The musical man seemed to calm a little more as well.

Martin pulled his bottle of water out of his pocket, and handed it to musical man. He took it and drank a big gulp. “Thanks,” he said.

Robin was looking at the door with an interested gaze. His finger traced the crack in the door, and he put his face close to the crack to look inside.

“What are you doing?” the guide asked.

“I’m trying to see if the seal is active. Judging from that pop we felt in our ears, I would guess so. That means we’re exclusively on the air inside the bunker now. Do you know if the air condition and replacement system is turned on?”

Gabby shook her head. “Not specifically. It should be active, but I don’t think they check it that often.”

“Maybe that would be a good idea to find out?” Robin asked. He sounded innocent enough, but his voice had the irritatingly superior tone that often had made teachers and their parents want to strangle him.

“Yes, you’re right. But we need to all get together, we need to talk about this.” Gabby seemed to pull herself together. “I think we all need to go back down to the control room.”

Martin reached a hand to musical man, and he got to his feet. He passed the water bottle back, and Martin stuffed it back into his pocket. They walked back as a group, and filed into the control room again. Faces turned towards them, some with hope in their eyes, and some with a weird kind of resignation. One pair, Martin thought, contained a strange look of cool detachment. They belonged to the guy with the long unkempt hair with the backpack. He looked like one of those survivalist types who lived in a cabin in Montana and caught their own food.

“If I could just have your attention...” Gabby said. Her voice had regained the tone she had before, and all eyes focused on her. Martin leaned against one of the computer cabinets, and stuck his hands in his pockets.

“As you heard, the door has closed out in the corridor,” Gabby said, “which means that we’re effectively sealed in. The door, like I said before, CAN be opened, but if we do, it can’t be re-closed. If there really has happened something outside, something that started the containment procedure, then we will expose everybody to contamination if we open the door. So right now, we need to find out what happened outside, before we take any drastic actions. Does anyone have cell phones with a signal?”

The group all dug into their pockets and came out with cell phones. Martin dug his own phone out and flipped it open, but sighed. As he had expected, they got no signal down here. From the murmuring replies, it seemed everybody had the same problem.

“What about the missile silo?” a tall blond woman asked. She was holding the hand of another woman, but Martin couldn’t tell if it was to calm her or more romantic. “Couldn’t we look out there? We could see the missile from above, so maybe we can look out that way too.”

“We could have, except that the silo is also sealed off to us now. We would have the same problem as with the front door, and I don’t think we should take the chance.”

“What about the hot line?” the short haired teenage girl asked. “Can we call the Department of Defense?”

“That line was disconnected a long time ago, unfortunately.”

“Was it disconnected physically or administratively?” Robin asked.

“What do you mean?” The guide looked at him.

“Well, did they just pull the plug on the line, or did they disconnect it by closing the number?”

Gabby touched her cheek. “I don’t know.”

“Because if we can get to the phone line, maybe we can get it to work again. Or perhaps connect it to our phones to boost the signal.”

“I think we need an electrical engineer for that...” The teen girl’s father began, but Robin raised his hand. “I’m pretty sure I could do it. I could give it a try. Well, my brother and I could, anyway.”

Martin blushed. It wasn’t often that Robin included him in his projects. Robin was the guy who could build anything. Martin simply worked with what he was given, although he would admit to having a certain knack for working with electronics. After all, he was the guy who could repair a new iPhone in twenty minutes, using only his mini-screwdriver kit.

The guide looked at them, her eyes seeming to linger at their faces. Martin guessed she didn’t think they looked like MIT material. “Do you think you could do something like that?”

“I don’t know, but I would be willing to try.” Robin looked at him. “What about you?”

“Sure, I’d try.” Martin licked his lips. “But what about that air condition thing you just talked about?”

Gabby nodded. “We have to find out if the air systems in the bunker are operating. They are downstairs, on another level and in the other end of the silo. But I’ve got to be honest with you, I’m not really sure how to turn it on if it isn’t working.”

“Maybe I can help you with that.” The man who had followed musical man into the corridor raised his hand. His grey hair looked like it had a life of its own as his head moved. “I’m Stephen Price...I sell air condition systems. Maybe I could come with you and take a look?”

Gabby nodded, but before she could say anything, the man in the Microsoft shirt spoke up.

“First order of business after the air should be to figure out if there is anything to eat or drink in here. I’m parched.”

“There is still several crates of supplies stored down here, but I’m not sure they are actually going to be good still.” Gabby nodded at the man with the unkempt hair. “Sir, you bought those cans upstairs, why don’t you open one and we can taste if it’s still good.”

The man clutched his backpack to his chest. “Absolutely not. Those are mine.”

“Sir, we’re all in the same boat here...” the big guy, Jonathan, put his hand on the long haired man’s arm. He jerked and stepped back, almost falling over his own feet.

“No. I said, they’re mine! Find your own damn water!”

Jonathan looked surprised, but then shrugged. “You said there were more down here?”

“Yes,” Gabby said. “Lowest level is very cold, so we use it to store all the old cans. Why don’t you and mister...” she looked at the man in the Microsoft shirt.

“Collins. Mark Collins.”

“Why don’t you and Mark go down the stairs to your right, and continue all the way down. That’s the level you want. You can’t miss them, they are big metal crates in the middle of the floor.”

Jonathan nodded. Gabby looked around at the others.

“The rest of you, stay put here, or go one level up that stair in the corner. That’s the bunk room, and there are tables and chairs up there, in case you want to sit down or even lie down. People don’t really go up there anymore, but I don’t think anyone’s going to mind right now.”

Martin looked at the old couple who had taken the elevator down. They were walking for the stairs to the bunk room, followed by the little boy and his dad. The teen girl remained behind. “I want to help, dad” she said when he looked back at her.

Martin could see the man’s face change a little, as he considered it. He was obviously not keen on leaving her out of his sight.

“All right, but stay with the others. You can go help carry water.”

As the two small groups split up, Martin looked at Robin. “Do you really think we can do this?”

“I don’t know. But it’s going to be fun to try.”

3. Jennifer

Jennifer felt Marcy’s hand squeezing hers, and tried to be comforting. She knew she wasn’t good at being the affectionate girlfriend, but she had gone on this trip to give it a shot and wasn’t about to quit on it now. Even if now was an underground concrete hole like this.

She knew Marcy had a touch of claustrophobia, that she didn't share herself. In fact, she quite liked the low ceilinged corridors and the atmosphere down here. She wasn't about to settle down here, though. They had to figure out if they could get out.

The two teenage boys had started a cursory examination of the red phone. One of them took the receiver off, listened to it for a moment and then focused his attention to the base of the phone. From his pocket, he produced a small screwdriver, and began unscrewing the old screws.

Marcy pulled on her arm, and she turned her head to her.

"Jen...we have to get out of here!" she whispered. Jennifer put her arm around her shoulder.

"It's going to be okay, Marce...you're going to be fine. It's all just a mistake, I'm sure of it. At the very most, we'll spend the night here, and then tomorrow someone will let us out when the museum opens."

"You don't know that!" Marcy said. Her eyes were looking big and scared. Jennifer led her towards the stairs the guide had pointed to.

"Look, Marcy, let's get you a place to sit down, okay? Maybe even lie down. You'll feel better."

Guiding her up the stairs, Jennifer looked around at the habitation part of the bunker. The floor was split in two rooms. The one the stairway led to had a couple of couches, recliners, a big table with six chairs around it and an old magazine rack. Jennifer saw an old LIFE magazine with Grace Kelly on the front cover sticking up from it. The room had a small kitchenette, with a fridge and stovetop, even a little oven. An open door led to another room with several cots standing in rows. This was where she led Marcy. One of the cots was already occupied by the old couple, the man being helped down by his wife. His face didn't look good, Jennifer thought. She wasn't a doctor, but she didn't think grey was a good color.

Sitting Marcy down on the second cot, Jennifer stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head.

"Now just take it easy, okay? Lie here a while. I'm going to go and see if I can help out with anything."

"Help out?" Marcy blinked. "You should be running things."

"No, I shouldn't. The guide is in charge here. She's the museum employee. I'm just a tourist, just like anyone else." Jennifer shook her hair back. "The last thing we need down here is a struggle about who's in command."

Marcy nodded. "Okay. Just don't be gone too long, please?"

"I'll look up in a little while and see if you're sleeping."

Marcy nodded and closed her eyes. Jennifer got to her feet and headed down the steps again. She gave a little sigh when she was sure Marcy couldn't hear her.

Marcy tended to act like a little girl when trouble arose, and it was beginning to get on her nerves, more than she had let on. At first, she had thought it was a conscious choice by Marcy, some kind of idea of feminine behavior she was trying to act out. At this point, she was beginning to believe Marcy simply was

unable to handle stressful situations. In the daily routine she would be fine, but when things began to break down, she would begin to lose her cool, and fast. She remembered getting frantic calls from the supermarket when the store had been out of something that Marcy had needed for the dinner they had agreed upon that morning. Sometimes, Marcy would be in the parking lot in tears because she hadn't been able to get hamburger with the right amount of fat content, or enough fresh asparagus.

Jennifer looked at the two boys by the phone again, but didn't want to disturb them. She listened for the two other groups at the stairs going down for a moment, but instead she went to the other people standing in the control room. One was the girl who had been with Jonathan, the other the man who had tried to escape before. In the corner, the guy with the backpack and the water bottles sat quietly, clutching his pack. Jennifer pegged him as the survivalist type, who waits for doomsday to arrive. It looks like he got his wish, she thought. She wondered how she would look to him, in her sensible summer dress and high heels. Probably as one of those people who were clueless about the world from his perspective.

The man with the *Les Miserables* shirt was talking and gesturing. "...I still think we should get out of here. What does she know, anyway? She's not even one of the people who used to work this bunker! She's just a temp, filling in."

"She's still right, though," an older man said. "If a bomb fell, we open that door and we're all dead."

"But who is she to decide what's right or not?"

"She's the one in command." Jennifer stepped all the way up. "You, me – we're all just tourists here. We don't know anything. She might only know a little, but it's better than nothing."

Les Miserables looked at her. "And you are?"

"I'm Jennifer Carter. And you?"

"Nate Fielding."

"Good, Nate, now we know each other. But I'm telling you, Gabby is right. So is this gentleman right here." She pointed to the older man next to her.

"Robert Porter, Miss." He smiled at her as he pushed his glasses up on his nose with a finger. "And thank you for agreeing with me."

"I am not so much agreeing with you, as trying to defuse a tense situation. When they get up here with some water, maybe everybody is going to feel a little better."

Nate made a contemptuous sound. "That water is over thirty years old, if we're lucky. Who knows if it's even drinkable. Nothing down here is kept up to speed. I bet they don't even have a television."

"I didn't see one," Jennifer said. "I'd also be willing to bet that signals are impossible to get through the concrete shielding."

"So we can't even check the news?" Jonathan's wife or girlfriend... *wife*, Jennifer thought, as she looked at her ring finger...said.

Robert shook his head. "No. No news, no phone, no anything. This place was built to be a safe, and a safe is what it is."

Nate shrugged, and looked over his shoulder at the corridor and the door out there. Jennifer saw something in his eyes, and felt her adrenaline begin to pump. He was getting ready to make a break for it.

"Nate..." she began.

Robert had turned his attention to Jonathan's wife, and was asking her what her name is. She answered that it was Carrie. Jennifer only heard this with the outmost edge of her senses. She focused on Nate, who took a step back towards the corridor. His eyes were sly, looking over everyone in the room. He knew that she was watching him, but apparently felt he could outrun or outfight her. Robert was blocking her way, so he obviously felt she would be slowed down. Suddenly he spun round and ran back into the corridor, heading for the outer door. Robert turned his head and shouted "HEY!"

Jennifer ran forward, not thinking but letting her body do the work. She leaped across the control console, swinging her legs around Robert so fast that he didn't even have time to react. At the same time she kicked her high heels off, landing on bare feet. She was running the moment she made contact with the floor, and flew down the corridor after Nate. He was only a few paces ahead of her, but he was taller than her and had longer legs. She knew he would reach the door before she could catch up, and her eyes looked round for another option. Seeing the tubes and cables that ran along the corridor above their heads, she got an idea. She leapt up, grabbed hold of a thick tube and swung forward, her legs kicking out like a scissor. She flew through the air, and her legs hit Nate right below the knees. He stumbled and lost balance, falling to the floor along with her.

She felt the impact from the floor all through her body as she hit it on her back and butt, biting her tongue from the shock. She rolled to her side and kicked off with her legs, shooting to her feet. Nate was clutching his leg and when she grabbed his collar, he moaned in pain.

Behind them, she could hear voices shouting. She held on to Nate, looking into his eyes.

"What exactly was it you didn't understand?" she said, looking serious. "You are NOT to touch that door! If you want to risk your life, that's your decision, but I'm not about to let you risk my life, or my girlfriends life on your whims. Is that clear!"

Nate whimpered and clutched his leg.

She turned, seeing Robert and Carrie behind her, as well as the twin boys.

"Holy shit!" one of the twins said. "You pounded him into the ground! Are you into martial arts or something?"

"In a manner of speaking." Jennifer hauled Nate back towards the control room. "I'm Lieutenant Carter, United States Marines."

Following Jonathan down the stairs, Sarah looked around and despite the situation she felt a tingling sensation in her spine. The stairs, the floor paneling in here, even the metal walls – they all reminded her of the *Nostromo* or the colony on LV-426. She almost expected the black Aliens to jump out from behind a corner and hiss at them, dripping slimy spit.

Their footsteps made metallic sounds on the stairs as they descended. Jonathan walked in the lead, with Mark right behind him. Sarah brought up the rear.

The stairs ended in a long corridor that seemed to curve slightly, as it followed the outer edge of the concrete casing around the bunker. There wasn't much to look at down here, she thought. Just two big rooms for storage, and what had, according to the sign above the door, once been an armory. Mark stopped in front of it, and half turned, giving her a glimpse of his eyes. She did not like the look in them.

"They probably took all the weapons out when the base closed" she said, making Jonathan turn his head and look back at them. "It would be too dangerous to leave guns around for people to just pick up."

"I'm sure you're right." Mark smiled. "But it wouldn't hurt to check."

He reached out and opened the metal door. The room inside was not much bigger than a broom closet, and completely empty, except for an old rifle rack. Mark's eyes flew back and forth, but didn't seem to find anything.

"See? I told you."

Mark turned his face towards her. "No one likes a smart ass, you know that?"

"Hey, hey..." Jonathan put his hand on Mark's arm. "Let's go find that water, shall we?"

They continued down the corridor to the room at the end. The air down here was cool, and had a metallic smell to it. Sarah licked her lips, feeling thirsty.

The room was still packed with crates, she saw. There were both wooden and metal crates, some stacked on top of each other, some standing by themselves. Several of the ones on the right were labeled "Water".

"That's what we need!" Jonathan said, and went to the first one. He grabbed the top and flexed his muscles as he tried prying the lid off. "It's stuck. Look around for a crowbar or something."

Mark and Sarah both turned their heads. Sarah spotted both a crowbar and a flashlight on a crate a few feet away, grabbed the crowbar and handed it to Jonathan. He stuck it in between the lid and the crate and began pushing down. The box made a groaning sound and came open, revealing what looked like hundreds of the little water cans.

"All right. Now, let's find out if this stuff is still drinkable!" Jonathan said, picked up a can and pulled the ring. Sarah noticed that it didn't make the same thin grinding sound a normal soda can made, but a heavier and somehow more solid sound. Jonathan sniffed the contents.

"Smells okay...like water, anyways." He brought the can to his mouth and took a careful sip. He sloshed the liquid around in his mouth, then swallowed.

"I think its fine. It tastes a little metallic, and we probably don't want to live off the stuff for years, but it hasn't gone sour and doesn't taste bad. All right, grab hold of the crate, we'll haul it upstairs."

"What about the other boxes?" Mark asked. "Shouldn't we check if there's something else we can use? Maybe something to eat?"

Jonathan nodded. "I guess that can't hurt!"

Sarah knelt down and tried reading the labels on some of the crates. "This one says 'MRE'."

"That's it. That means Meal Ready to Eat. Its field rations."

"But will it still be good?" Sarah said. "Even after this long?"

"If it's standard MRE's," Mark said, "Then they are dehydrated and can last practically forever. Give me the crowbar!"

Jonathan handed it to him, and Mark opened the crate. Inside, stacks of little silver bags lay on top of each other.

Mark picked one up, and felt the contents through the bag. "If nothing else, there are crackers in these, or some kind of chocolate bar. Jelly, probably, as well." He tore the bag open, and poured the content out onto one of the other crates. "See, beef slices in this bag here, and here's a pack of charms, some crackers and peanut butter..." He handed the crowbar to Sarah.

"I'm not sure I would trust twenty years old beef slices, but I'm sure some of its edible." Jonathan nodded. "Okay, but first things first. Let's get the water up."

Mark went behind him and took the other end of the box. Sarah didn't know what to do, so instead stepped back to allow them free passage. She put the crowbar on one of the full boxes.

As they moved out into the corridor, a loud noise and shouting came from above them.

"What the hell is going on up there?" Jonathan asked.

"I'd say someone took advantage of the guide being gone and tried to make a break for it."

Jonathan groaned.

"Are they all stupid? She told us to stay put in here. Kid..." he looked at Sarah, "run up and see what's going on."

"I'm not called 'kid'!" Sarah said, but then ran ahead of them, her curiosity getting the better of her. She took the stairs two at a time, and popped back up into the control room just as the tall blond women from the couple came in dragging the guy in the t-shirt from *Les Miserables*.

"What's going on?" she asked. One of the twin boys answered.

"Looks like we have a military officer with us. She just stopped an escape attempt."

The blonde woman in the summer dress looked at Sarah. "Did you find water?"

"Yeah, they're bringing it up right now. Is he okay?"

She looked at the man being dragged, quietly moaning as he clutched his leg.

"He'll be fine. Can you get me some of the water? My friend upstairs could use a drink, and I think you'd better get some to your brother as well."

Sarah nodded. She turned around in time to see Jonathan's head pop up through the stairwell. He looked around and tried to take stock of the situation.

"Can we keep moving, please?" Mark's voice came from below. "This thing isn't getting any lighter."

"Sorry." Jonathan took a few more steps up, and rested the crate on the floor. Even with his big muscular arms, it looked like it had been heavy.

Sarah bent over the crate and got two cans of water. She handed one to the woman in the summer dress.

"You're a soldier?" she asked. She was rather amazed. The woman didn't look like a soldier.

"That's right. I'm a Lieutenant in the Marine Corps. I'm Jennifer, or Lieutenant Carter, whatever you prefer."

"I'm Sarah. But you can call me Ripley!" Sarah said.

"Ripley, huh? Like in *Alien*?"

Sarah nodded. "Yeah, how did you know?"

"My favorite movie when I was growing up. OK, get that to your brother, and then get one for yourself afterwards." She looked at Jonathan and Mark. "How much of that was down there?"

"Plenty. At least six more boxes like this one. Water won't be a problem."

"That depends on how long we're going to be here for. All right, distribute one can to each, and then hold out. Tell people to save it a little."

Jonathan nodded. The twins were already stepping closer to get their cans. "There's food too" he said, "something called MRE's."

"Good. I'll be upstairs." Jennifer walked off with her water can.

"Hey, Lieutenant!" Jonathan asked. She turned round. Sarah saw in the response that this woman was used to being called by rank. "Are you in command now?"

"No. Gabby is, until she says otherwise."

She walked upstairs.

Sarah waited for a moment, took her own can and went upstairs to find Pete and her father.