

Bug Hunt

Short Horror Tale No.6

By
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Bug Hunt

The instant Graves and I made eye contact, we were ready to kill each other.

He was slouched in one of the dozen plastic chairs of the briefing room. His long, slicked-back hair had been raven-black the last time I had seen him – now it was streaked with grey. Graves was still lean and gangly; there wasn't an excess pound of weight on his body, which was a reflection of how fast, strong and damned deadly the man could be. As always, when he sat he sprawled – when he stood, his back would be ramrod straight. Those narrow, dark, mean-looking eyes reminded me of a snake. The ugly scar underneath his clean-shaven chin reminded me of the time I'd slit his throat...

We tensed in unison. His left hand slid down for the automatic pistol holstered at his hip. My right hand was inside my jacket, my fingers on the butt of my own handgun.

Only one thing stopped us from turning the room into a scene from the Wild West: we were both here for a big payday. If we shot each other to death before we were even briefed on the job, it would be a damned shame.

So we froze, hands ready to draw and fire, eyes locked onto each other and blazing with searing hatred.

I rasped to Wilde, who was entering the room at my side. "What's that piece of shit doing here?"

For an executive of a billion dollar company, and a man unaccustomed to violence, Wilde was pretty dismissive of both my words and the reaction between Graves and myself.

"He's another mercenary – here for the money, like you." Wilde slipped past me and headed for the front of the room. "If either of you doesn't want two hundred thousand dollars for one day's work, feel free to shoot it out or leave. Your choice."

In perfect synchronisation, Graves and I released our weapons and relaxed. Graves raised his right hand to his throat and tapped at the digital voice-box which was attached there. His grating electronic tones were emitted, and I wished – yet again – that I'd cut deeper five years ago. I should have cut his bloody head off.

"There won't be a problem," Graves said. "We just have a history. And issues to finish at a later date... Isn't that right, Turner?"

I eyed Wilde. "While we're on your dime, we're your people."

"Good," the exec stated.

Whilst I truly hated Graves, I held an intolerable dislike for Wilde. The man was short and pudgy, mid-thirties and had a polished appearance. Perfectly styled hair; a crisp dark suit; an eye-dazzling coloured shirt and tie; jewellery on his wrists, fingers, ears and right eyebrow. I didn't dislike him because he was hugely rich, rather because of his lack of respect for anyone else. He acted like a god. I'd seen him treat underlings like filth – the group of merc's here only got better treatment since one of us might snap his neck. Wilde oozed superiority, and everyone he met simply existed to do his dirty work. And I also felt that if we all died on this 'job' of his, he wouldn't care at all. I'd already decided to listen to the briefing and quit afterwards if I didn't like the setup.

\$200,000 is worth nothing if you're too dead to spend it.

I took a seat at the back of the room, on the left. Graves was one row in front of me and on the right. I knew it would irritate the shit out of Graves to have me behind him. A smile crossed my lips.

There were three rows of four chairs, directed towards the large flat screen monitor at the front of the room. Four more men followed myself and Wilde in. Three were merc's; the fourth looked to be a tech of some kind.

I knew all the mercenaries.

McBride was ex-Irish Guards, tall and built like the proverbial brick outhouse; his mop of unkempt ginger hair was paling as he entered his mid-fifties, but he was still the toughest man here. I'd once seen him shot in the shoulder, chest and gut, and still take out four armed men with his bare hands. Close-quarter combat was what he excelled at: if his big hands locked onto you, you were dead.

Howard was American. If rumours were true, he'd grown up as a Kansas farm boy, done a few tours in the marines and then gone private for the big bucks. To be honest, Howard didn't even look military: you could imagine this twenty-four year old as a clerk in your local superstore. He was medium-height, of unremarkable build, round-shouldered, and had blonde hair that was receding fast enough to set an Olympic record. In a fight, his bright blue eyes had a way of hardening though – and then you knew he was a true killer. Howard was a good, reliable soldier, a decent man to have beside you.

Lee was Korean, and I knew nothing of his pre-mercenary years. I didn't even know if he was

from North or South Korea. He stood just over five feet in height, was stocky, and his hard, stern face expressed only his legendary lack of humour. When we had first met, people had remarked that Lee spoke far better English as a second language than I did, although I was British; I can still remember Lee trying to fathom my Northern England accent, which mellowed over the years as I travelled with work. A few colleagues also sarcastically called Lee 'Bruce' – on account of his martial arts skills, which were, quite frankly, piss-poor. The Korean excelled, however, with any gun from pistol to sniper rifle.

Making up the fivesome of killers-for-hire, were Graves and myself. Both in our mid-forties, born in the same county, soldiered in the same regiment, fought side-by-side until we quit the army. Our disputes arose when we both became mercenaries. I wouldn't fight for anyone who threatened my country of birth or who I hated on principle; Graves soon learned that terrorists and bloody dictators paid more, and he had no qualms training bombers or murdering helpless civilians. That had culminated in our encounter in Rwanda – when I'd slit his throat and left him to bleed out. I would have waited to ensure he died, but he'd shot and stabbed me several times, plus a hundred of his cohorts had been closing in.

McBride, Howard and Lee all gave me a slight nod as they filtered through to sit on the front row. I nodded back. It was a sign of respect, and their lack of doing so to Graves spoke of what they each thought of him.

I couldn't help but wonder what Graves was doing here. The other three merc's and myself had been contacted, then flown into a run-down city in a tiny North African country. The four of us had been collected together at the airport and driven to this anonymous suite of offices, where we had met Wilde. Graves had already been here, waiting, and there had been no prior mention of him. Wilde was clearly a man of intelligence, so why include two enemies in a potential team? To be honest, why include Graves ever – he couldn't be trusted, and that outbalanced the considerable skills he possessed.

I gave the tech guy a glance as he sat down on the remaining front row chair. He was around twenty, with black hair and a scruffy beard. Whereas the rest of us wore a range of comfortable clothing, he wore jeans and a T-shirt emblazoned with the logo of some death-metal band. The tech had a tablet in his left hand and kept keying at it, like some train commuter who has to check Twitter on his iPhone every few seconds.

When the door was closed, Wilde moved to the wall-screen and touch-activated it. A swirling company logo appeared: VVB Biological Solutions.

"You don't need to know anything about VVB," Wilde began tersely, "other than we have a facility sixteen miles outside this city. It's underground. Work there is into the theoretical use of biological weapons and their delivery into populations."

Which surely made the facility illegal according to international law, and suggested VVB was linked to government black-ops departments. This didn't sound good at all.

"Over two hundred personal lived and worked at the facility." He touched the screen and a layout of the complex appeared. "As you can see, the facility is on one level and has been designed as three separate rings – one for living, one for bio-research and one for research into delivery systems. The three rings are set at the corners of a triangle, with long main corridors linking them."

Now would come the crunch...

"Yesterday, the facility went dark. There was an emergency call and a security team from the surface went down to investigate. The team did not return. We've not heard anything since."

McBride interrupted and the action made Wilde's face flush with annoyance. "So what's the emergency? You must have video-feeds, thermal imaging..."

"There's nothing at all down there. No monitoring of any kind." He paused. "To maintain such records would harm VVB's need for deniability."

I decided to annoy Wilde further. "So what do you have?"

"An audio recording of the initial request for help, plus one from the security squad."

"Let's hear them."

His expression changed. Wilde had clearly intended for us to listen to the recordings after the briefing – he'd heard them once and didn't want to hear them again.

"All right."

A few tabs at the screen brought up an audio player. He configured it and stepped back.

A woman's urgent voice shrieked from speakers either side of the screen.

"Security... You've gotta get down here—"

In the background, slightly muffled, something heavy was dragged across a floor. Two men exchanged words:

“What about Billy and Nina?”

“They’ve had it. They’re already gone...”

The woman’s voice yelled: “We have people dead down here. Christ, it’s awful. They’re out... They’re out... You’ve got to rescue us. We’re barricading ourselves in...”

An almighty crash rang out – almost loud enough to be a mortar shell exploding. Something fell over and shattered. A man gave a guttural cry...

And a terrific buzzing filled the speakers.

(At this point, Lee hissed: “Is that some crazy bastard with a chainsaw?”)

Then the woman screamed. The cry started as terror and ended as choking agony.

We were all relieved when the recording clicked off and died.

Until the second recording began...

“This is Jacobs to Surface. We’re down and we’ve exited the lift into the Living Quarters Ring. The lights are on. Everything looks normal. We’re accessing a security panel and...”

One of Jacobs’ team added: “No sign of fires or contamination according to the system. The facility wasn’t put on lockdown by anyone here – all the lab doors are still unlocked. I’ve also overridden the security codes for the doors to all personnel quarters to allow us entry...”

“Good man. You hear that, Surface? Looks like there’s no Biohazard at least.”

“You’ll need to confirm that yourselves in the Bio Labs, Jacobs. We need to be absolutely certain there has been no breach in containment.”

Jacobs offered with a doomed man’s humour: “If there has been, you won’t be getting that twenty back, you know.”

“Keep cool, man. What we heard didn’t sound like a virus. More like somebody went postal.”

“I know.” Jacobs tried to laugh. “One guy goes crazy and two hundred scientists can’t subdue him? I’ve always said these jerks were pathetic.”

He paused. “Team will split. Three left, three right. We’ll check out the entire Living Ring. While we do, we’ll seal off the linking corridor to the Delivery Systems Labs. That way no one can come from there and get behind us... Then we’ll head down the other corridor to the Bio Labs.”

“Proceed, Jacobs. And be aware, lift is on lockdown until situation verified.”

Heavy footsteps were heard, and calls of action between the security men.

One man said to his leader: “What do we do if someone jumps out in front of us?”

“Shoot and apologise later.”

For several minutes, the search went on. Rooms were entered and checked. Then:

“Jacobs, this is Team Beta. We’ve just sealed the link corridor to the Delivery Labs... Proceeding... Hold on, we’ve got a body here in the passage. Woman, mid-fifties. Major stab-wounds to the torso. Looks like someone used a damn harpoon on her.”

“Any ID?” Jacobs responded, then he changed to: “Wait, I’ve got something here too. A noise...”

Faint, barely audible on the playback, we heard the weird chainsaw-buzz from the first recording.

I frowned until my frown hurt.

The buzzing grew louder, and I instinctively wanted to call a warning to the security teams.

“We’ve got it here too now,” said the caller from Beta Team. “What the heck is it?”

“I dunno...”

Sounds seemed to explode from the speakers. First was twin buzzing roars, then the drumming blurts of gunfire... and then screams...

Until only the buzzing remained.

Wilde switched off the recording. He was as pale as a sheet.

“There’s... nothing more...” the exec explained. “That’s all we have.”

For seconds, silence haunted the room. Whatever this was, it was beyond the experience of any of the fighters here.

Wilde paced back in front of the screen.

“So... the situation is unknown, but it’s clearly more than our own security can handle. We need you to search the facility and eliminate any threat you may find.”

“Any threat you may find?” Lee repeated. “Your security assumed it was one of your own, gone crazy. But after your search-team split in two, both teams were attacked and taken out together. Are you now considering that the facility has intruders and is under their control?”

“No,” Wilde dismissed. “There’s one way into that facility: the lift shaft. Intruders would have to go past our surface security and down the shaft, which no one did.”

“So,” I put in, “it looks like a bunch of your lab personnel turned rogue? I take it they were all vetted closely when you hired them.”

“They were vetted extremely carefully. The situation makes no sense. Whoever has done this

hasn't tried to leave, nor have they made any demands."

"Could one of your viral agents have turned them crazy?"

"Not that I am aware of. It's a possibility, I guess."

"Are there any guns down there?" McBride asked.

"None... Except for what the security team were carrying."

"And the buzzing sound?" the Irishman prompted. "You must have an idea what that is."

"Not a clue."

"Bloody marvellous."

Wilde looked around the room, feeling the tension and proving impotent against it. He took a deep breath and continued.

"Mister Graves has worked as a consultant for us several times. We contacted him and asked for a list of the best personnel within eight hours travel-time. He selected you four. Also joining the group will be Matt Robinson here." Wilde gestured to the tech. "His job will be to deal with over-riding any computer control systems that might stand in your way. Matt will get you where you need to go. He's one of our best personnel... Once the threats are dealt with and the Bio Labs are confirmed A-OK, you will then be able to return to the surface and the job will be done."

"What if some of the super-bugs from your Bio Labs are loose?" Graves asked, via his grating electronic voice.

"You'd be infected and dying."

Howard, who had listened intently and not spoken so far, snapped at this: "But we'll be wearing Biohazard suits, won't we?"

"If a virus is out," said Wilde, "then it's somehow got through stringent safety protocols – from filtering systems to multiple airlocks, and more. It would be what the lab guys call a 'nightmare bug'. Against something so potent, a protective suit would be about as much use as a lucky charm."

"In which case...?"

"You wouldn't be able to return... We'd have to instigate a burnout. Incinerate the facility."

"You mean burn us alive?"

"We'll provide cyanide capsules for the worst-case scenario. You wouldn't suffer."

"Why not burn the place out now?" I input. "Kill whoever slew everyone down there."

"It's quite simple. The viruses down there, and the equipment, are valued at tens of millions. It's worth sending you down there in the hope of saving such losses." He added unconvincingly: "Besides, we hope there might be survivors."

"Nice," Graves commented. "I almost admire your ruthlessness."

If I'd had any sense, I would have just left the room. The job was a rotten one; the client was of a kind I'd usually avoid on principle; and there was Graves' presence to consider too. Unfortunately, some instinct in me wanted to make Wilde squirm. So I stood up instead.

"I'm going to speak for all of us. We'll do your dirty job, but not for \$200,000. We could all be dead the moment we arrive down there. It'll cost you \$400,000 each, paid into our accounts before we leave this building and head to your facility."

For a moment I thought he was going to explode. A vein started beating hard in the side of his left temple. His eyes narrowed to slits.

Through gritted teeth, he uttered: "That's... acceptable."

"And there's more," I added icily. "Robinson: are you married or..?"

The tech turned and replied. "I'm single and without any family, that's why I agreed to go. Other guys who could do the job would leave behind a... bigger hole... if they didn't make it."

"Fair enough." I eyed Wilde again. "If he's taking the same risk as us, he gets the same money. \$400,000, paid now before we leave."

This time, I was convinced Wilde's head might actually explode. Somehow, he restored his composure.

"That seems only fair," he murmured.

Robinson looked at me in amazement.

"Final question," McBride shot at Wilde, "before we really do agree. Who leads our team?"

Graves answered before Wilde could speak.

"Turner," he stated, thumbing in my direction. "You guys all trust and like him. I trust him professionally."

The other three soldiers accepted the statement readily. Robinson nodded, as if his vote really counted.

"Sure," I said. "Let's get moving, then."

And I blatantly ignored all my gut feelings.

* * *

An hour later, we were on-site, geared up and ready to descend into the complex.

Our funds had all been transferred to bank accounts, then immediately re-transferred into other accounts. This made it impossible for VVB to get their money back. I helped Robinson to set up his accounts online – the guy was still so bubbling over with gratitude he could barely speak.

At the centre of a fortified compound, lost in hundreds of acres of arid wasteland, was the nondescript building which housed the top of the lift shaft. The local security team provided all the equipment we requested, acting with the kind of reverent respect that came from the knowledge of how far better-trained and capable we were. I guess they felt like animals peering higher up a food-chain at more deadly predators.

The six of us wore heavy army clothing, adorned with a camouflage pattern that would clearly be useless; flak jackets that would provide some protection against stabbing or gunfire; and climbing harnesses. Our helmets were strapped on tight, with lamps ready to be used if needed. Everyone had belt-pouches containing First Aid Kits and other supplies. Robinson had a small shoulder-bag filled with tech gear.

In terms of weapons, each soldier's primary was a Heckler-Koch MP7A1 submachine gun – a high-quality killing machine that was lightweight, gave low recoil and was supplied with magazines holding forty rounds each. The HK's armour-piercing bullets had great stopping power; surely they would be more than a match for anything we met below. Also, we all carried a Glock 18, a good handgun that fired 9mm bullets from extended 33-round clips, but had a recoil akin to a mule-kick for those not used to it. A survival knife, plus pairs of smoke grenades, frag grenades and flashbangs completed our arms. The tech accepted a pistol and promised not to draw it unless ordered to do so by one of us.

For comms, we had headsets that I had had set up to allow communication between only the six of us – I didn't want chatter from above causing distractions. If we needed to call the surface, there was a programmed handset radio on everyone's belt.

Entry into the facility was down the two-hundred-foot lift shaft. Robinson had blanched at the thought of a rope-descent. I explained that the lift couldn't be brought back up due to risk of contamination – something he should have already realised.

Robinson was buddy-connected to Howard for the journey down. We slid into the deep black hole like cavers descending into some abyss, our helmet-lamps arcing around. The only sound was the coarse whirring of our belay grips travelling down the heavy ropes.

Above us, the upper doors of the lift shaft were closed and hermetically sealed.

End Of Sample

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