

Bradford II – Badlands

Chapter 8 – Chris Dudley

“A fall likely to leave an ordinary human in pain, or with something broken. Bradford knew how much his augmented body could take though and he immediately began to run towards the car park.”

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The bomb in Tucker’s Town was the main item in the news and something her father was concerned about, but that just added to Marie’s feeling of being unloved and neglected. Everyone was talking about the implications of another bombing campaign in San Pablo. Who was behind it ? What did they hope to achieve ?

“If you’re going away for a few days, you should let me know.” Tobias had told her.

That was it, Tobias had been the only person to mention her absence and he’d assumed she’d been enjoying a new lover. Her father’s head of security had been the only one to comment at all, on her being missing for several days and even he hadn’t mentioned the bruises on her arms. Of course she had vanished for days before, usually with someone tall and muscular. Marie had a thing about jocks, usually hockey players for some reason she didn’t understand. There had been one or two women lovers too, tall muscular sportswomen. At one time her father used to make a bit of a fuss, sometimes sending a few of his flock to look for her. Now he just sighed and looked disappointed.

“It’s not as if I’m a total fuckup.” She mumbled.

“Sorry, what did you say ?” Asked her father.

“Nothing.”

She was in his office, grazing from the remains of his breakfast. Why hadn’t he asked about the huge bruise near her left elbow, where Camila had grabbed her ? Marie suddenly understood why and felt her face blushing from embarrassment.

“If you’re not busy today, there are a few things you can do for me.” Said Pastor Ivor.

“Yes, of course I’ll do them.”

“Just a few deliveries Marie. I know I can trust you to do it right.”

Her father had no idea he’d said just the right thing, at just the right time. She loved him of course, the way all girls love their father. He was fussing about, putting various letters into envelopes, handwriting addresses and various names. There was also a large amount of cash going into one of the packages.

“Payment for Dimitri’s last shipment.” Said her father. “You’ll need to deliver that after midnight. He’ll be setting up shop for the night in 32 East. Do you remember the place ?”

“Yes.”

“Take someone with you for that one, ask Tobias for someone good.”

“I will.”

Dimitri, the bastard who’d introduced her to the group who would make all her dreams come true. More like her nightmares. She was tempted to take a few of her father’s team and arrange a little accident for Dimitri. She wouldn’t though, her father seemed to think highly of the seller of illegally imported meds.

“Terrible, this Tucker’s Town trouble.” Said her father. “Keep your ears open, someone is bound to know who was behind it.”

“Do we really care ?” She asked.

He laughed, which pleased her a great deal. Usually only a visit from Bradford made her father laugh. "It looks like something being done to destabilise San Pablo and that it always bad news. So keep you ears open my wild and bruised daughter, ok ?"

"I will dad, promise."

He'd noticed her absence and the bruises, which pleased her. While he filled envelopes and various bags, she watched the morning news on the screen which her father kept perpetually turned on. She took an interest in the Tucker's Town bomb now. If it interested her dad, it was important to her too.

'Four houses in Tucker's Town section A, were totally destroyed in the blast...'

There were pictures scrolling behind the words, as the broadcaster tried to wring every piece of horror, anger and revulsion out of the news item. There was a three second image of an elderly couple, both obviously dead.

"They shouldn't show that on the news." She said. "Not people blown apart like that."

"Their viewing figures have doubled." Said her dad. "They get a lot of complaints, but people watch it, probably so they can complain."

Marie froze, her skin actually feeling physically cold. She knew one of the faces, being put on the screen for just long enough to horrify the viewers. Part of the top of the skull was missing, but Marie recognised Polly. Oh, how her memory could play tricks, especially if she was bored or thinking about something else. Polly at Tucker's Town, it all came flooding back. It was on the list she'd dictated for Camila's little recording device. It was amazing how well her memory worked, when she was scared shitless.

"Are you alright ? Did you know her ?" Asked her father.

"No dad, she just looks so young.....So pretty."

He patted her hand and went back to writing notes for his various contacts. Marie now knew who'd set off the bomb in Tucker's Town, but she could never tell her father. Supposing he found out from other sources ? He always did seem to find things out, eventually. She just hoped that Bradford killed Dimitri, before her father had a chance to talk to him.

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It had been an ordinary morning, until Bradford saw the girl on the walkway. Not on the walkway itself, but sat on the wall about halfway to the car park. She looked about twenty, dressed in the latest fashion for faded jeans and T shirts which showed off the midriff. Quite a pretty girl, but she was casting no shadow in the morning San Pablo sunshine. He knew it was one of his ghostly watchers without looking for evidence to prove it. There was something about her that didn't look right, like the picture of a famous person airbrushed to remove any imperfections. The girl looked too clear, her edges too sharp to be real. Bradford walked until he was only a few feet from the silent watcher.

"Are you just my way of knowing I'm going crazy ?"

No answer, but the pretty face did look in his direction for a second or two, before looking towards the car park. He was going to tell Gillian about this one, he'd made up his mind to get her opinion on his sanity. If he survived of course, the watchers were always harbingers of extreme danger, life threatening danger. Bradford used his PD489 communicator to contact his driver. There was no answer, but he still didn't want to call Roland and cause a panic.

"How bad is it this time ? What are my odds on surviving the morning ?"

No answer, but her eyes met his for a fraction of a second and he knew she'd reacted to his words. He moved closer and put his hand out to touch her, but withdrew it at the last minute. Not out of

fear, but out of the worry that she might disappear and never come back. Her lips moved, though he seemed to hear the words somewhere inside his head.

“Chris Dudley.”

A name that brought back memories and one of the names he'd been thinking about adding to the most wanted list. Chris had been in charge of an entire PD489 squad, until Bradford had taken over. There had been a lot of bad luck, a huge number of botched missions. It had all been put down to a mixture of laziness and incompetence, until Chris had vanished. There had been secret bank accounts and links to Lakey Pharmaceuticals. It seemed Chris Dudley had been clever rather than stupid and lazy. He was reported to have left San Pablo for another of the New Nations, with several million dollars to give him a comfortable retirement. If he had retired? There was no time to speculate, his driver still wasn't responding to calls.

Bradford had done it twice before, but it was a dangerous move. Get it wrong and he was likely to end up dead and lying in the communal garden, several floors below the walkway. He sat on the wall and swung his legs over, hearing his trousers rip. It wasn't easy being gymnastic in the clothes he now wore for work, but there was a change of clothes in his office. As his legs went over, he grabbed the top of the wall and let his body swing in towards the walkway below. Timing was crucial and he only had a fraction of a second to get it right. As his body swung, he let go of the wall, falling about twenty feet, to land on the walkway below his. A fall likely to leave an ordinary human in pain, or with something broken. Bradford knew how much his augmented body could take though and he immediately began to run towards the car park. Time to begin winding up the vast security machine he had at his disposal. Time to call Roland.

“No response from my driver Roland and I don't think he's gone for a smoke.”

“I'll send a full unit to your block. What is your exact location?”

“I'm on the move Roland. Don't send a whole unit, just Sequel and one other. With luck I'll deal with it before they arrive.”

“Fine, but I'm getting everyone into an APC and ready to move.”

There were reasons why Bradford didn't want to press the button on a major security problem in the block where he lived. It would unsettle Amoe of course, who was expecting their child and it might cause problems for Camila. The hyenas weren't exactly well respected members of San Pablo society. He ran up the stairs, coming into the car park from the opposite direction, to the one the three men were watching. Actually two men and a woman, even assassin was a gender neutral job in the New Nations.

He ran at them, knowing they'd hear his feet against the concrete floor. Bradford still couldn't shoot people in the back, unless it was really essential. All three of them turned, bringing blasters out of holsters hidden beneath jackets. Another of the watchers was there too, leaning against a support pillar. A man this time, middle aged with thinning hair. Two watchers in the same morning, things had to be bad. Damn, his driver's lifeless body was creating a pool of blood near the PD489 pool car. “It's as if part of me turns off, the human side.” He'd once told Gillian. “I become more animal, more primitive. I don't care if I live or die then....There is just the urge to kill those who would kill me.”

He could trigger the change by altering his mood, though it was all done unconsciously. He was moving at twice his normal speed, by the time the woman fired her blaster at him. Bradford needed one of them alive and out of choice, he always tried to leave the females alive. She was good though, far too good to leave alive. She was aiming again, before the two men had even raised their weapons.

“Sorry.” He muttered.

His Ion blaster left a tiny hole in her forehead, as it burned a hole through her head. A fraction of a second later, she was a dead body on the ground. A tidy blood free body, the Ion blaster cauterised as it burned.

“Fucker ! You’re going down.” One of the men yelled.

Her lover maybe, or just someone who fancied her ? Anger was good in opponents though, it clouded their judgements and lengthened their thinking time. Bradford was feeling no emotion at all, his reaction times were at least ten times faster than the angry male. He ignored him and ducked a shot from the other male, a quiet enemy.

“Always take out the quiet ones first.” Bradford told trainees. “The loud guys who boast about gutting you or tearing out your eyes, are usually all hot air.”

Usually but not always though, both of the men knew how to use a blaster in close quarters fighting. Bradford stuck to his plan, shooting the quiet guy twice in the chest. He instinctively ducked and avoided a shot aimed at the back of his head.

“What are you, a fucking android ?” Asked his last surviving opponent.

He didn’t want to kill the man, but ideally he’d be easier to handle as a heap on the ground. Bradford easily side stepped another blaster shot and kicked the side of his opponent’s right knee. There was the unmistakable sound of breaking bone, as the man fell to the ground and began to scream.

“The loud mouths always turn into screamers.” Bradford muttered.

Old habits die hard and Bradford still kept nylon ties in his jacket pocket. He had the man tied at wrists and ankles, before jamming his blaster up under his throat.

“Stop screaming or I’ll make the pain go away, permanently.”

The threat worked, almost always did. It was amazing, the pain relieving effect of a threat under the right circumstances. One of the young members of the Hyenas appeared, gun in hand and looking confused.

“I’ve dealt with the problem.” Said Bradford. “Tell everyone to stay out of sight, while the mess is cleaned up.”

The boy went, off to spread the word, the need to be quiet and unseen until the cops had gone. Not that Bradford had any intention of involving San Pablo’s finest.

“Does the name Chris Dudley mean anything to you ?” Bradford asked his prisoner.

“Fuck you ! There was no need to break my leg.”

The eyes had told him the truth and the PD489 interrogators were good at loosening tongues. Soon he’d know who Chris Dudley was currently working for. Bradford called Roland.

“Book it as terrorist related Roland, following routine surveillance. No need to involve the cops at all, terrorism is ours to deal with.”

“Are you alright Bradford ? How is Amoe ?”

“Amoe isn’t even aware anything has happened, yet. I’ve two dead would be assassins and one wounded Roland. Get a clean-up crew over here as soon as possible. Oh... And it looks like Chris Dudley is involved in some way.”

“So, President Herbert didn’t put him in a secret gulag after all.”

“No Roland, we were all wrong about that one.”

His prisoner had passed out, which did at least keep him quiet. The watcher was gone of course, now that the danger was over. He was going to discuss the whole ‘watcher thing’ with Gillian off the record and on a highly confidential basis.

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It was amazing how much of a difference a few food supplements and a little extra protein could make. He felt better than he had since entering the Badlands and moving into Desperation. Camila had kept her word about the weapons too. Roxy had kept their group to just four, all of them carrying military blasters. Not exactly the bleeding edge of technology, but the weapons looked reliable and each had been fitted with a new power pack.

"The weapons are perfect." Roxy had said, while twirling one about. "Too impressive looking would cause suspicions. These look like good quality recycles."

Jim hadn't caused any arguments as part of their team. Roxy trusted him and he seemed one of the few inhabitants of Desperation, who didn't have a personal grudge against Hector Pérez in any of his aliases. There had been a long argument about taking Maggie on their 'meet the neighbours' trip.

"I nearly got her killed once." He'd said. "Can't we take Bob? He hates me already."

"This might be called the Badlands Hector, but we already trade with most of the other settlements." Roxy had said. "They're just like us, people who don't fit in, those that can't get a proper ID, or are wanted in San Pablo. Besides, they know Maggie and like her."

"I can see your point and she's keen to go with us."

"What are you hoping to find in these places." She'd asked.

"I honestly have no idea, Camila just said to get my face known in most of the settlements and have a look around. Something with a huge arrow over it would be nice, saying 'this is it,' and a few flashing lights above it."

She'd laughed and he'd been the one to tell Maggie she was going to be part of the group.

"Sorry I nearly got you killed." He'd told her.

"You did ok, for an old guy."

She hugged him and they were ok again, though he did notice the demotion from crush to old guy. It had to happen of course, though he was sad it had happened so soon.

"It looks an unloved shit hole, but once you get inside...." Said Roxy.

"You get to see it looks a whole lot worse." Added Maggie.

Jim's contribution to their double act was a grunt in agreement. They were looking at a settlement on the side of a valley. Not a reclaimed old town, but a brand new village of shacks. Or at least it had been new once, about thirty years before according to Jim.

"Hector, welcome to Pile o' Bones." Said Jim.

"Don't tell me, they found a pile of bones here." Said Hector.

"He's Jared now and that's important." Said Roxy. "Think before talking to him and try not to talk to him at all. Less chance of a fuckup that way. Too many people want to see Hector dead."

"Yep, just ignore the old guy." Said Hector.

The code word to get past the young guy on the door was 'Herbert Was Here'. It seemed political satire had finally reached the Badlands. It was just like Desperation, the same funky smell, the same food in boxes about two years past its use by date, the same odd colour to their well water. Actually no, the well water in Desperation was now crystal clear, thanks to a few old filters from before the end of the world.

"Good to see you Maggie. Staying for a while?"

The headman was wrinkled with age and hugged Maggie for a good five minutes. Everyone loved Maggie, Roxy had been right to bring her. The women wanted to feed her, the old guys wanted to protect her. As for the young guys? Maggie wasn't going to find it hard to find a partner, when the time was right.

"Better than bringing a six week old puppy." Roxy whispered to him.

They were invited to join the locals for a meal and Hector took a few careful pictures. He had no idea what he was supposed to be looking for, so he tried to remember names to go with the faces on the pics. Who did what, who was the best at this and that. It might all be for nothing and he hadn't seen anything that looked out of place.

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They'd been to several different apartment blocks, in the good, bad and downright iffy parts of San Pablo. It appeared that Ms A Chapman had moved around a lot, leaving a lot of broken hearts behind her. They did learn her full name though, from one of her ex-landlords in the City North district.

"Allison Emily Chapman according to her City employment registration card." He'd told them. "A nice woman, no bother at all and paid her rent on time. Not what you'd call really pretty, but she had something.... Oh, she had something."

"A lot of male admirers in her life ?" Asked Yasmine.

"Is she alive ? I don't like to speak ill of the dead."

"As far as we know, Allison is alive and well." Said Chet.

The landlord was the wrong side of middle age and balding, yet Yasmine saw a certain look in his eyes, as he talked about the woman who'd rented two rooms and a shower from him. Some people had that sexual chemistry, men and women. Identify it, bottle it and you could make a fortune.

"Three of them came looking for her after she left," said the landlord, "all of them younger than her. One thought I was lying about her leaving, demanding to see her room. I had to threaten to call the cops to get rid of him. She had it alright.....That something."

"How old would you say she was ?" Asked Yasmine.

"You don't know ? You're the cops."

"We'd appreciate your cooperation." Said Chet.

"Yes of course, I've always been a supporter of you people. You guys fucked up the gangs pretty good huh ? I'd put her at about forty two, but that was a couple of years ago."

"Do you have a forwarding address for her ?"

Of course he did, there was that look in his eyes.... Allison really did seem to have it, whatever it was. Three more sets of rented rooms in quite a short period of time, before Allison had moved to an expensive part of 6 Ocean.

"She hooked a rich one, her words. Glad to see her go, that woman was like a feral cat. No end of problems after she left, debt people calling and guys half her age."

Her last landlord had been a woman, who'd had no problem talking ill of Ms Chapman, without asking if she was dead or alive. After a lot of miles and worn shoe leather, they were sat in a PD489 pool car, outside a beach side apartment block. Yasmine had looked up apartment 17 in the security services shared database and there was a problem.

"Fuck... The entire building is owned by Amoe Scott." She said.

"Jeezzz, screwed if we bang on the door, screwed if we don't." Said Chet.

"I know someone," she said, "I need to make a call, shouldn't be long."

They had an official contact in Maria's department, but that meant the enquiry being logged. At the moment it was the grand pappy of all conflicts of interest and she had no wish to make it any worse. Bradford was a pretty cool guy, but he was unlikely to smile on anyone kicking in doors in a building his wife owned. Yasmine called her friend Judy, who worked two offices down the corridor from Maria.

"Sorry, I know it's been months.... How are the kids ?"

“Fine, the youngest just signed up for dancing classes. Who do you want me to look up Yasmine ?”

“Ben ? Your Ben just signed up for dance ?”

“Fuck you Yasmine DuClare, he’s a good kid. He can sign up for what he wants.”

“No, I agree..... Sorry.... It’s just that.....”

Judy was laughing and Yasmine wished she could push herself further into the shop doorway, which she’d decided was a private enough place to make the call from. An elderly couple were lurking nearby and she was sure her face was flushed and sweaty.

“You’re fine Yasmine, I laughed about it. I told Emma that she’s got to do a night class in heavy engineering to balance the karmic scales.... Or something like that. So, we’re fine.... Who do you want me to look up ?”

“Amoe Scott owns the building where I want to lean on someone.”

“Awkward to say the least.”

“Can you give me the full un-redacted legend for apartment 17 at Ocean Vista Apartments in 6 Ocean ?”

“I can, but the system is slow today..... Officially it’s rented by Hamilton Properties as hospitality accommodation. Hamilton Properties is a known front for..... Imagine a drum roll Yasmine.... The one and only Dimitri.”

“You’re fucking kidding ?”

“As if I’d kid you..... There are three notifications of interest on that apartment. The tax people have an ongoing investigation, as do immigration and the good folk at drugs and trafficking. Kick down that door and you’ll piss off a lot of public employees.”

“How about you guys ? Any reason you’d prefer I left it alone ?”

“We never had this call and you never asked for my advice, agreed ?”

“Agreed.”

“We wouldn’t object to life being a little awkward for Dimitri.”

“Thank you Judy..... Ben can take Tap and Bally if he wants.”

“Bitch.”

After giving Chet a cut down version of the call to Judy, she used her PD489 ID to gain access to the building. Security looked discreet but effective, two armed guards with top of the range weapons. All legal of course to protect the building’s residents from the perils of living in San Pablo.

“I want to retire to a place like this.” Said Chet.

“My parents have a house and a couple of acres out near Pandan.” She replied. “I’ll probably retire there, once I’ve done my full forty years.”

His face collapsed but Yasmine thought he still needed punishing a little more, for the Gupta’s squeeze comment. They stood outside the steel reinforced door to apartment 17, neither of them reaching for the doorbell.

“Bang on the door with your fist.” Said Yasmine. “Shout too, loud enough to disturb some of the neighbours.”

Chet needed no further encouragement, kicking the door as well as banging with both fists.

“Security Services, open this door immediately. We are armed and authorised to use force to enter these premises.”

It took barely five seconds for a woman with long dark hair to open the door. She was blinking, as if just woken up from taking a nap. Fairly pretty, the woman had kept her figure and looked to be somewhere in her mid-forties. Yasmine knew who had opened the door.

“You must be Allison Emily Chapman ?”

“Yes, but I’ve done nothing wrong.”

Chet strode past Allison, as if taking possession of the luxurious apartment.

“We have questions for you.” He said.

“Don’t you need a search warrant ?”

“Not when it’s a matter of national security.” Said Yasmine.

Neither of them touched Allison, they just moved towards her as she backed away. Their prey settled in the kitchen, going to ground by sitting at the table.

“I’d better call my lawyer.” She said.

“You will speak to no one.” Barked Chet.

“Talking to anyone without our permission will be considered an act of treason.” Said Yasmine.

“May I call my lawyer ?”

Yasmine sat next to Allison, noting the vein throbbing on the side of her forehead.

“No, you may not. We’re going to talk about your time with Jason Cetrone and after that.....You’ll tell me about your relationship with Dimitri.”

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Bradford hadn’t expected Tamara to be sent out as part of the clean-up crew, but it was nice to see her. There’d never be anything there for Amoe to worry about, he just liked having her around. Through all the unpleasant and painful changes to his physiology, Tamara had been there, holding his hand and being supportive.

“How did you get sample collection duty ?” He asked.

“Yasmine is on special duties and....”

She was actually blushing as she looked at him.

“Miss McBride has some important news for you, and thought you might appreciate it coming from me.”

The trouble was that Gillian was right. After all those years of being nice to him when it mattered, he did care for Tamara and he did like having her around. Tamara was taking various bodily fluid samples from the two dead assassins and making even that look pleasant.

“What is this news ?” He asked.

“My fault really, don’t sack me Bradford.”

“I won’t, promise.” He said. “Finish your samples and I’ll show you the delights of the communal laundry room. We can talk there, no one ever uses it.”

The laundry room smelt of damp and had become a trysting place for the teens in the block. It was usually empty during the day, no one trusting the ancient machines with their clothes. They sat side by side on a wooden bench, as if watching their washing spin around.

“Ok Tamara, tell me about this news ?” He asked.

“Just don’t get angry.”

It was his turn to hold her hand, offering her support with a gentle touch.

“A lot of the others were doing it, even Miss McBride, I saw her.” Said Tamara. “We all knew the cops would arrive soon, or soldiers. A girl has to eat, so I started filling a bag with anything small that might be easy to sell. I started with expensive medical instruments, before moving on to stealing memory cubes.”

“I don’t blame you Tamara....What did you do with all the things you took ?” He asked.

“It’s a specialist market and people kept asking me where it had all come from. On two occasions I only just avoided being arrested. I was too scared to even throw it all away, keeping it in two large bags at the bottom of my wardrobe. I’d almost forgotten about it all, until I came to work for PD489.

I mentioned the things I'd stolen to Miss McBride and she was quite keen on seeing the contents of the two bags."

"So I assume you brought them into the office ?"

She was crying and he had no idea why. He was fairly useless with crying women, even Amoe. He put his arm around her shoulders and made what he hoped were soothing sounds.

"Why are you so upset ?" He asked.

"She shouted at me, called me a stupid girl and a thief."

It was beginning to make some sort of sense, as his mind put the jigsaw pieces of her comments together.

"You took something important Tamara. What was it ?"

More tears, but holding her in his arms wasn't a chore. She had always been a fantasy figure though, the girl who was nice to him, the girl with the warm smile. It would be an unrequited love now that he had Amoe and Rosa was almost there.

"No more tears Tamara. What did you take ?"

"I took quite a few memory cubes, thinking they might contain commercial secrets. I'd heard that some of those can be worth millions. Miss McBride looked at them and started shouting at me, said I should have noticed the government labs seal on the boxes."

"What is on those data cubes Tamara ?"

"You Bradford, what someone called Michael Reece did to you when you were just a kid. I didn't understand most of it, but Miss McBride did and called me a stupid girl again. She needs to see you Bradford..... I think I'm supposed to bring you to her."

He didn't need any more surprises, not now that Rosa was almost born. For some reason he kissed Tamara on the cheek, before standing up and kicking one of the ancient washers. He'd left a dent in the metal, which was strangely satisfying. He kicked it again, causing an avalanche of rust to fall out of the bottom.

"Why now Tamara, when I'm almost settled down ?"

"Sorry."

"It's not your fault. I just wonder what there might be on those data cubes. Is Rosa going to be a normal child ? Come on, we'd better go and see Gillian."

Tamara moved but he didn't, his mind full of promises he'd made to Amoe in the past. Not just her, he'd kept things back from Maria too. He knew there were things missing from his mind, like empathy and a conscience, though he'd been working on that one. Trust was a problem for him too, though that did come with the territory, if you worked for a semi-secret part of the security services.

"Call in and get an APC out here, I'm going to take Amoe with us." He told Tamara. "No more hiding things from her, she needs to know the truth about me."

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Amoe had ridden in the back of an APC quite a few times when she'd been a cop. They were nothing like the high powered vehicles used by PD489 though. The armoured personnel carrier growled its way through the traffic on the expressway, like a large matt black predator. There were the PD489 markings now too, which made their APC stand out as something special. Cars made way for them, some actually waving as they went past. Not that there were any windows, even for the driver. Everything was seen and heard on internal screens and speakers.

"Oh, how I'd love one of these to do the weekly shopping." She said.

"Does it have a siren ?" Asked Tamara.

The driver turned on the siren for a few seconds, causing the traffic to move away like a swarm of fish avoiding a shark.

"We don't really need it." Said the driver. "Methane burners are rare, we're just about the only thing on the road with an exhaust and genuine engine noise. People hear it and move aside."

Bradford was silent, barely talking after telling her about the attempt on his life and the sudden appearance of data cubes from his past. He'd briefly mentioned Chris Dudley resurfacing, but there had been no details. She was being taken to a classified PD489 meeting with Gillian McBride though, so she was willing to be patient. The driver muttered briefly into his headset.

"The headquarters building is on Beta Six level security." He said. "We'll need to enter through the lower garage doors."

"Nothing to worry about." Said Bradford. "Just Roland doing his job and being cautious."

Once they were inside, it was impossible not to be impressed by the number of men and women in smart uniforms, carrying the latest military Ion blasters. Every set of doors had at least two armed guards. Amoe wasn't scared by it all, the amount of security was actually comforting. She was going to give birth in Gillian's lab, in just a few weeks time. She'd probably hate it after a while, but being smothered in security for the birth, suited her just fine.

"I want all this for when Rosa is born." She said "Beta Six security, an APC to bring me here and lots of smart looking people carrying guns."

Bradford held her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"You'll get it all, the lot." He said. "Our famous toroidal engine VTOL craft to pick you up though. No worrying about a bad day on the expressway."

"Even better."

Tamara went with them to see Gillian, which didn't surprise her. Bradford had told her about some of the work LabSync4 had done to him and about Tamara always being there to offer cold drinks and sympathy. He hadn't mentioned how pretty the girl was, but she could hardly blame him for that. What man ever came home and told his wife, he'd just hired a woman who was sex on very lovely legs ?

"Amoe, so good to see you." Said Gillian. "I'm pleased that Bradford wants you to know everything, warts and all."

He must have called Gillian before picking her up, preparations had obviously been made. There were copied notes on the conference table and a large screen showing the face of a man. A Michael M Reece according to the text under his picture. The name began to drag up a few memories from her days as a cop. He'd been a government scientist who'd vanished off the face of the earth one day and was assumed to be dead.

"Can I have a private word before we begin ?" Gillian asked Bradford.

"No, my wife gets to hear everything." Said Bradford. "It's worth remembering that Amoe is the only one of us who hasn't been on the run from State Security at some point in their life."

Everyone laughed and Gillian nodded at him, before sitting at the top of the table, a screen controller in her hand.

"Very well, this is the late Michael Reece." She said. "The man who placed implants in your brain Bradford. Probably when you were only five or six years old."

"So Reece is dead ?" Asked Amoe.

"Yes, killed by Bradford, though it was in self-defence." Said Gillian.

"He nearly took my head off with an antique firearm."

It was all new to her, all of it. Amoe decided to listen and query nothing else, until Gillian had given her presentation.

“What sort of implants ?” Asked Bradford. “What do they do ?”

Another picture appeared on the screen. A piece of human tissue of some kind, next to a metal ruler. Whatever it was, it was small, just under four millimetres long.

“There are several and they make you..... You Bradford. They’re organic, growing and developing as you grew up. Reece put seven of them into your brain, to control certain kinds of thoughts and behaviour. Some thought patterns were enhanced, while others were almost completely eradicated.”

“Fuck Gillian !” Yelled Bradford. “I’m about to have a child. Am I still human ? What the hell am I ?”

“I er..... Did ask for a private word with you.”

“Just tell me what I am and if Rosa will be affected ?”

Amoe felt a slight chill, as she began to think the unthinkable. Bradford had skills no human possessed, but that was cool, he was Bradford. Every mother wants her child to be special, but also to be like every other child. It was one of the great conundrums of motherhood.

“Tell him.” Said Amoe.

“It’s difficult to be sure, not every trait is passed on and of course, every child is the progeny of two people. Gifted parents can give birth to quite ordinary children and ordinary people can give birth to genius children. Mentally, Bradford was altered by the implants, so Rosa is likely to have normal human brain functions. Physically though..... If you were to push me for an answer....”

“Consider yourself pushed.” Said Amoe.

“Christ Miss McBride Tell him !” Yelled Tamara.

That visibly shocked Gillian, the normally quiet and polite Tamara, becoming angry with her.

“Fine, fine.....” Said Gillian.

Another picture on the screen, a handwritten graph with notes in different coloured ink. A large 84% notation had been wringed round many times in red ink.

“I believe there is an 84% chance that Rosa will inherit Bradford’s extra strength, speed and enhanced reaction times.”

“That’s good isn’t it ?” Asked Amoe. “It is, isn’t it ? Tell me Gillian, it is a good thing.”

“Yes of course it is Amoe.” Said Gillian.

“She’ll win everything on school sports day.” Added Bradford.

There it was again, wanting her child to be like all the other kids, but special too.

“These implants I have, all seven of them.” Said Bradford. “Can they cause hallucinations or some kind of delusional disorder ?”

“Why Bradford ? Are you developing some symptoms ?”

“It’s a day for complete honesty.” Said Bradford. “I’ve been having what may be hallucinations for years. Hardly the thing you can talk about and remain an armed member of PD489. I knew LabSync4 were passing some information to the president’s office, so.....In the end, I decided to keep quiet about it.”

Amoe found herself holding his hand, far too tightly.

“What do you see ?” She asked.

“No one but the four of us will ever know about it.” Said Gillian.

“It began years ago and I’m still not sure if they really exist.” Said Bradford. “I think of them as the watchers.....”

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