

Bradford

Chapter 13 – Operation Janus

“If PD489 wasn’t a secret organisation.” Herbert had said. “I’d arrange a public holiday and name a school after each of you.”

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Amoe drifted for a while, in the limbo between drug induced dreams and waking reality. A shadow on the wall became a bird, which flew across the room and vanished into a wall. A few patches of dirt on the door frame, turned into large furry spiders, which doubled and tripled in number. The spiders looked likely to fill that side of the room and then they were gone and she was left looking at a filthy and rubbish strewn room. She slept again and woke to find a giant hand moving towards her, only for it to vanish before it could touch her head. When she finally woke up properly, it was all in a rush. One moment she was having a pleasant dream about Bradford and the next, she was sat up and looking at her squalid surroundings.

“What the hell did they give me ?”

There was no answer to her question, she hadn’t expected one. Amoe felt nauseous and slightly dizzy if she moved her head around too fast. The strong smell of urine wasn’t helping her nausea, someone had obviously used part of the room as a latrine. There was a San Pablo version of Vogue. Nothing to do with the original of course, but someone had used the March issue to cover the windows, leaving the room illuminated by whatever light could filter through the paper. It had to be daylight though, the room had no other lighting. Someone had spray painted a skull on the door and there was another on the wall near the windows.

“Skulls drug house,” she muttered, “must be way out east.”

Amoe felt as though she had the worst hangover of her life, yet she had to sharpen her wits. Talking to herself was helping to get her thoughts straight. The Skulls were mainly in Twenty East, she was a long way from home, a long way from anywhere. She’d raided a few drug houses, though usually she was just there to look pretty for the media. Amoe stood and felt a slight pain in her side. She pulled her uniform to one side to examine the bruise, only it wasn’t a bruise.

“Fuck !” She shouted.

A skin bug, a large one from the size of the bump under her skin. Druggies were often covered in the things and left them untreated until the females began to lay eggs. The official line was that skin bugs were a nuisance, but not a serious health risk and never fatal. Amoe knew better, she’d seen the bodies of druggies who’d used dirty knives to dig the hatchling out of their skin. The pain was bad, they all said it was the worst pain in the world, once the eggs began to hatch. There was a story about a cop, who’d plunged his hand into a pan of boiling water, just to stop the pain. That might have been an urban myth, but Amoe had seen the bodies of those who’d died from infections, after digging the hatchling out of their skin.

“They eat you.” One druggie had told her. “From the inside.”

Amoe hoped hers was a male and prayed that she didn’t pick up more of the insects. The door opened and the girl was there, the blonde. She was carrying a torch and a brown paper shopping bag.

“Are you ok ?” She asked. “We heard you scream.”

The middle aged guy remained by the door, a blaster in his right hand. Amoe lifted her uniform and showed the discoloured bump to the blonde.

“Skin bug, a big one.” Said Amoe.

“Not quite the luxury you’re used to eh ?”

The blonde rolled back her sweat shirt sleeve and showed a similar bump on her upper arm, quite close to the elbow.

“This place is alive with the damn things.” She said. “Not a problem if you dig them out in a day or so. If you don’t..... you just hope it’s not a female.”

Amoe had seen the look in the girl’s eyes before, pure hatred. It wasn’t just hatred because her father was wealthy, she was used to that. This was a look of sadistic delight at the thought of Amoe screaming once the eggs hatched. The blonde might be a hired professional, but she enjoyed her work.

“I’ll get some CompZed.” Said the guy by the door. “With luck you’ll only be here for a few days.”

The blonde put the shopping bag down and Amoe could see that it contained some bottled water and a few bags of junk food. Before she could investigate further, the girl was getting out a tiny camera.

“Co-operate and you might get better food next time.”

The blonde turned on the camera; it was the same make that most school kids used, to take pics of their genitals to send to their friends. She turned the camera on and set it for movie mode.

“What is your name ?”

“Amoe Lee.”

“Have you been kidnapped.”

“Yes.”

“Would you like to go home ?”

“Yes.”

The camera was turned off and her captors had obviously finished with her. As the door was half closed, Amoe asked about something which was bothering her.

“Is there a bathroom ?”

The blonde looked around the room and sneered.

“It’s a big room.”

They were gone, taking the torch with them, she was back in semi-darkness. Amoe went to the window and pulled off the pages of Vogue. Ten feet away was another building, with similarly covered over windows. She was also on about the fourth of fifth floor, so breaking the windows wouldn’t achieve much, other than pissing off her captors. She carried on pulling off the magazine pages though, it greatly improved the light in the room.

Then she emptied the paper shopping bag, which contained a large bottle of water and several packets of junk food. They’d included some hand gel and a toilet roll, but no change of clothing or any way to clean her teeth.

“Fuck.” She muttered.

Amoe needed to pee and it was easy to tell which corner of the room had already been turned into a toilet. She decided to avoid the stench and use the opposite corner of the room. After all, no one was expecting her to clean up the mess. She pulled her panties down, folded her skirt up around her waist and squatted. She leant her back against the corner and removed the knife from her boot. If her captors had paid a bit more interest in the schools uniform event, they’d have realised that kids can be quite bloodthirsty. A group of seventeen year old girls had added a secret knife, hidden inside her boot. The steel wasn’t bad and the short blade had a wicked looking serrated edge.

“If push comes to shove.” She muttered. “The blonde gets it first.”

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The president had greeted them both with the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for heroes, but they hadn't felt like heroes. They'd rehearsed the story about Samuel coming out of a back room, a blaster in each hand.

"If PD489 wasn't a secret organisation." Herbert had said. "I'd arrange a public holiday and name a school after each of you."

There had been a lot more gushing and they had kept smiling, but they both knew that Samuel had been tied to a chair when Maria had killed him. They'd have both happily done it again and didn't feel any remorse. It just made it hard to appreciate the general feeling of euphoria in San Pablo. The President had seen Bradford privately and there had been more congratulation and the official handover of the military stealth VTOL.

"It's yours now." Herbert had told him. "Along with the crews and maintenance teams. You'll need to find room for them in the PD489 building."

They'd need housing too, but Bradford was confident that Roland could handle that. It was a good meeting, the kind of meeting he'd dreamt about, as he'd trudged the streets in his cop issue boots. Maria summed up their feelings as their new toy landed on the PD489 roof.

"I never thought I'd be so pleased to be back here." She said.

They went to the intelligence gathering room, where dozens of eager young interns copied items from the media. Any snippet of news might indicate new subversive activity in a part of San Pablo. Not that PD489 did much with the intel; most of it went straight onto the military database. Gupta was there though, still healing and wearing a cast over his arm, but using his other hand to work a keyboard.

"I knew you hadn't died." Said Maria.

Bradford didn't like to admit it, but he was pleased to see the rather unlucky third of their team. Wasn't there a clumsy one in the three musketeers? Bradford seemed to remember Porthos falling over a lot, but that might have just been in movies.

"It's a pity you'll miss Operation Janus." He said.

"We'll bring you back a souvenir." Added Maria.

Gupta had trouble getting out of his chair, but he managed it and stood smiling at them.

"I'm going." He said. "Roland worked something out with one of the military pilots. I won't be in combat, but I'll be in the engineer's seat, in one of the VTOL craft that takes you to Lakey Island."

Bradford wanted to hug Gupta, but decided that might set his healing back a few days.

"That is great news." He said. "You deserve to be there."

"I just hope we don't need a proper engineer." Said Maria.

They left Gupta, Maria going to her lab to finish a few things and Bradford heading for his office and the inevitable list of questions and queries from Roland.

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"Bradford, It's Kealani Lee."

The call had come in about ten seconds after he'd turned up the aircon and poured himself a decent cup of coffee. Roland had his tablet in front of him and Bradford could see a long list of items requiring signing off by the squad leader..... him.

"We don't know each other that well." Continued Lee. "That is mostly my fault."

"Normally I'd love to chat, but I have a lot to do today." Replied Bradford.

"It's Amoe, she's been kidnapped."

People often talk about the floor opening up when they hear bad news. For Bradford it was a deep sense of being to blame, for not being there, for not having called her in days. He tried to mime at Roland, to get him to record the call, but just confused his PA.

“Mr Lee, let’s be truthful with each other. I take it you know what I really do for a living ?”

Roland had almost fallen off his chair and Bradford just hoped his guess was right. If Amoe’s father didn’t know about PD489, then he’d have to revert to the ‘it was all a joke’ ploy and what kind of guy jokes about his girl being kidnapped ?

“Yes Bradford, I do.”

Bradford actually felt every vein in his chest untighten.

“I want to give my phone to a colleague and have him record this call. Is that ok with you ?”

“They said she’d die if I involved the cops.”

Then why call me ? He thought, but didn’t say. He had a terrified parent on the phone, there was no reason to expect logic or common sense in anything Kealani Lee said.

“We’re not cops Mr Lee. We don’t follow the rules, which is why we can help you far better than they could. Now, can I involve PD489 in this ?”

Silence for a few seconds.

“Fine, just don’t get her killed Bradford.”

He handed his phone to Roland.

“Amoe has been kidnapped, can you.....?”

Roland took about fifteen seconds to route the call through their comms and have Mr Lee’s voice coming out of the tablet’s speakers.

“Ok, when did you realise that she’d been kidnapped ?” Bradford asked.

“They called and asked for a ransom, sent a short clip of Amoe at the same time.”

“You’re sure it was her ?”

“I know my own daughter ! Yes it was her. They want two million in cash.”

Bradford pictured Maria listening to the recording and knew that she’d say the amount was too little. He was one of the richest men in San Pablo, two million was almost an insult. He wasn’t even going to ask if he’d be able to get the cash together.

“Have they given you a time and place for delivery of the money Mr Lee ?”

“That is the real reason that I called.” Replied Kealani Lee. “They’ll let me know where to take the money in the next hour or so. The important thing is that they want you to deliver it and it’ll be tonight.”

“Me ! Did they give any reason ?”

Bradford was beginning to feel a little paranoid, someone was deliberately giving him the run around, he knew it. Kidnapping Amoe had Samuel written all over it, but Samuel was dead, his body turned to ash.

“No, they were just insistent that it had to be you. Her boyfriend Bradford Scott, they said she’d die if anyone else turned up.”

Roland was looking concerned, he couldn’t fail to turn up for the attack on Lakey Island, PD489 were running much of it. Plus it was blindingly obvious that Bradford would be killed once the kidnapers had their money. It was fairly certain that Amoe was already dead, but Kealani Lee didn’t need to hear that.

“I have arrangements to make Mr Lee. Call me when you have a time and place for the money to be delivered.”

“Thank you Bradford..... she loves you, you know that.”

The call ended and he got up and went to the window. His view included the staff eating area and the playground of an elementary school. The view was neither inspiring nor relaxing, but it would have to do. Bradford had a lot to think about.

"You can't deliver the money." Said Roland. "They'll kill you as soon as they have it."

"I know Roland."

Why had the government given them an office block near a school? It was madness when he thought about it.

"Statistically." Added Roland. "There's a seventy four percent chance that she's dead already."

"I know Roland."

He didn't have long to think, but he'd already decided what he had to do. Soon Maria would be ready to leave and there were the orders about what kit and equipment was needed for Operation Janus. Janus the double faced god of beginnings, gates, transitions, time and doorways. It was a very apt name, President Herbert had chosen it well.

"And the president Bradford..... he won't tolerate another of your personal missions..."

He turned towards Roland and saw his PA flinch, waiting for some kind of emotional eruption. There was none, Bradford knew exactly what he had to do.

"Don't worry Roland, I'll be going to Lakey Island as planned."

He saw Roland smile and knew it wasn't just the right decision, but the only one he could make.

"I have a few calls to make, but then we'll decide on what kit is needed and get the transports loaded up."

Roland left his office and Bradford sat in his chair and called the first person he needed to talk to.

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The problem was that without her phone, Amoe found it hard to measure the movement of time. It might have been an hour after she'd been left alone, or it might have been three hours later, when the door opened again. The blonde was at the door this time, while the middle aged guy dragged in two old folding chairs. There was still no sign of the third guy, the young one.

"I'll bring you a lamp of some kind before dark."

The middle aged guy seemed almost friendly towards her. He set up one of the chairs and indicated that she should sit on it. He put the other chair opposite her and went back to the door and came back with another brown paper shopping bag.

"I know you've probably done this lots of times, being a cop." He said. "But it's best if I do it for you. Pull your uniform out of the way."

She mattered to them, which was odd. She'd seen their faces and posed for the pics to be sent to her father. In most kidnap cases she'd be dead by now, but her captors seemed keen on keeping her in one piece. She pulled her uniform up and away from where the skin bug had set up home.

"Phew, that is a big one." He said.

He'd put together a kit, quite a good one. Few cops bothered with antiseptic wipes, but he did it right, wiping the area thoroughly. Then he actually pricked her skin above the bug, so that the CompZed could penetrate quickly. He used the spray to liberally cover the skin above the bug. They really did want her in one disease free piece. He counted slowly to a hundred, as it said on the CompZed spray.

"This will sting." He said.

"I know."

Nice knew sharp ended tweezers, probably freshly sterilised. He knew what he was doing, getting a firm hold on the bug and twisting as he pulled. It hurt like hell, but the evil thing came out in one piece.

"Any bug this big is certain to be a male." He said.

He killed it the way Bradford killed them, squashing it between thumb and forefinger with an almost childlike enthusiasm. More wiping with antiseptic wipes and then he pressed a large surgical plaster over the small hole in her side. No expensive private clinic could have done it better.

"Thank you." She said

He began putting the things back in the bag, obviously not trusting her with sharp tweezers. He handed her a large spray tin though, of fairly expensive pesticide.

"They're resistant to most things, but this might help. Spray it around where you intend to sleep."

"Don't forget my lamp."

He went to leave, but noticed that the magazine pages had been taken off the windows.

"Stay away from the windows Amoe, there are gangs in some of the other buildings. We had somewhere clean and secure planned, but....."

"I know." She said. "I upset your plans."

He left and she heard the door being locked again.

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Bradford walked through the stores and he could see Roland's dilemma.

"It's a small island." Said Roland. "If we take all this, there'll be no room for our operatives."

He'd said it with a smile, but President Herbert really had given them everything they could possibly need. It had probably been done out of guilt, PD489 had often seemed like the Cinderella end of the security services.

"There's more stuff stacked against the far wall of the garage." Added Roland. "Including the six drums of napalm."

Napalm on a tiny island, they were likely to kill more of their own than the enemy. The exact nature of the enemy was still a bit of mystery, but was likely to be mercenaries hired by Lakey Pharmaceuticals. Ex special ops forces, ex cops and the numerous other redundant warriors, who earned a living by selling their expertise at mayhem. They were likely to be tough and Bradford just hoped that many might run when they realised a full assault on the island was underway.

"We just take what we need." Said Bradford. "Don't load our guys up with too much weight. A good blaster each and a few grenades, that'll be enough."

Roland was looking distressed and pointing at the full storerooms.

"But.... the President Bradford. He'll expect it to be used."

"Fine, add a backup piece to their kit and maybe a decent knife, but that's it. They have to be able to walk."

He was beginning to understand how Roland's mind worked.

"And don't even think about loading it into the transports, just in case we need it." He added. "Most of this stuff will be a hazard to have anywhere near us."

Some was really good though, like the latest Henriksen military Ion blasters. They packed a real punch, as did the light anti-personnel grenades that Roland had made sure were stacked at the front.

"Pity we can't sell the stuff we'll never use."

Roland was looking horrified, but Bradford had what he hoped was a good idea.

"Or swap it for something we actually need, like more of the light grenades."

Roland was tapping away on his tablet and allowing the stores team to begin giving out the new equipment.

"Sounds good," he said, "but the paperwork would make it impossible. The military aren't geared up for returns and you might end up with another fifty drums of napalm, or even cooking oil."

His PA was right, the mindless bureaucracy of the military was infamous. Bradford wasn't thinking of swapping their unwanted windfall with the military.

"Bobby Laszlo is the guy to talk to." He said.

"Who?"

"Bobby is a purveyor of the best army surplus stock in San Pablo. He can find the unfindable for a price and will gladly swap our napalm for a few Ion blasters."

Roland was looking suitably scandalised, but it was the obvious solution to their problem.

"A fence! You want me to use a criminal arms dealer?!"

Bradford walked into one of the store rooms, beckoning Roland to follow him. He thumped the side of a crate, one of eight that contained the same lethal rail gun.

"TK986 Rail Gun." Said Bradford. "Superb weapon, best there is, only it needs to be fitted to a tank or a heavy armoured vehicle. We don't have a tank, or a heavy APC and we're never likely to have them. Not much call for clandestine tanks Roland."

The point had been made, the stores were full of such crates. Full of wonderful state of the art and expensive weaponry. Most of it was completely useless to them.

"Do you want this stuff sitting in the stores forever?"

"No.... but The President...."

"President Herbert gave me permission to use PD489 assets as I see fit, there's even a signed piece of paper somewhere. I'll give you Bobby's number, you have to call him anyway. You know the stuff we need, give him a list and haggle for a decent swap for our surplus kit."

There was so much of it, even a couple of missiles design for high speed patrol boats. It was as if someone in the military had just ticked six of everything and then sent it to them.

"Why?"

"Why what Roland?"

"Why was I going to call this Bobby Laszlo person?"

Bradford was playing with him a little, enjoying the thought of Roland collaborating with someone like Bobby.

"Ahh yes Roland, I need to tell you about that and something that I'd like included in the deal for our oversupply of equipment."

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Lakey Island had become a swamp of fear and loathing, just as Gillian had expected. One of the kitchen staff had died under interrogation and everyone was scared. Lakey was acting like a dictator, getting worse with every unchecked excess, every piece of brutality. So far he'd viewed Gillian as being loyal to him, especially after she'd offered to produce a delivery device in three days.

"You'll be safe Gillian." Said Mike. "I've allocated three guards to patrol your cottage during the night and I'm having a couple of cameras put above your front and rear doors."

Was there a slightly odd look in his eyes as he said that? Gillian thought that might have been her very understandable paranoia. You're not paranoid if they're really out to get you, as the popular quote went.

"Thank you Mike, I'll feel much safer at night."

Gillian had seen death and brutality, she'd even been the cause of some of it. Then though, there had always been a professional distance between her and nasty consequences. Often she'd been able to justify the horror as being in some way essential to her project. This had been different though, the interrogation of the kitchen staff had been brutality for its own sake. Plus deep down, she knew it was all her fault.

"Who paid you to poison Gregory Halster?"

That was all the guards ever asked the three they beat up. There were several guards, there had to be, giving someone a serious beating is hard work. There had been no trace of poison in Greg's last meal, or in his stomach contents. That didn't stop Mike from blaming the kitchen staff and accusing them of being in league with some unnamed nemesis of his. Perhaps the three young kitchen staff had merely been a tool, a warning to everyone on the island.

There was a lawn of sorts behind the main lab. Crab grass of course, nothing else could survive the salty spray of ocean air. The staff used it for their breaks and there wasn't really room for them all to gather.

'All staff to the rec area. All staff to the rec area.' The internal speakers had said.

They were lined up, one girl and two men, all looking terrified. They'd beaten one of the men first, beating and asking that one question, until he was incapable of answering them. They left him bloody and moaning, on the grass for over an hour, until someone had him carried to medical.

"Who paid you to poison Gregory Halster?"

They asked the girl next. She was small, probably only five foot two and weighed next to nothing. Each blow sending her sprawling over the grass. She was lucky in a way, a blow broke her upper arm and she went from screaming to unconscious in a matter of seconds. Gillian had heard the humerus break and couldn't stop herself from crying. One of the guards kicked her a few times, to make sure she wasn't faking it. She too was left there, her blood staining the crab grass.

"Who paid you to poison Gregory Halster?"

The guards were getting into the swing of things by the time they got to the last guy, using their knees and feet straight away. They didn't even stop after he was obviously unconscious and unable to answer the one question they kept asking. Eventually Mike had told them to leave the kitchen helper and carry on with their usual duties. It was over an hour before anyone realised the last guy had been beaten to death.

"How did we get to this?" Someone had muttered at her.

Gillian was wise enough to say nothing, she even did her best to hide her tears. No proper funeral for the young man of course, just a hole in the ground near where the transports landed.

Now Gillian was wondering how to spend two days perfecting a device that was already perfect. The clockwork had already gone, replaced with a fulminate detonator. She fiddled with the power pack and tried to avoid eye contact with Mike.

"Good, Good." He said. "It looks more professional already."

He left, Shereen following in his wake. Shereen hadn't been quite so gushing over Mike lately, it's hard to ignore seeing someone being beaten to death. Gillian had the power supply to install and check and then testing the pathogen transport cells would take a few hours. Bradford had to arrive soon, or Gillian would be forced to do the unthinkable. Release the pathogen on Lakey Island.

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Bradford was in their new stealth VTOL, a good mile in front of the rest of the invasion force. They were going in low, fast and hopefully invisible to the numerous detection devices on Lakey Island. Maria was with him, or rather at the back of the craft, helping everyone to check their equipment

and get their Kevlar armour nice and comfortable. No more Schneider style fowl ups, everyone would go in well prepared and certain of their objectives. His communicator buzzed, it was Roland. "I have something Bradford."

At least he was calling him Bradford now and not sir. He'd left Roland with instructions about what kind of information to look for.

"The police are best at this kind of thing." He'd told Roland. "Even if they don't realise what's going on. Watch for anything unusual in out of the way spots, the kind of place a kidnapper might use." Roland hadn't looked convinced, but he had obviously followed orders.

"The skulls are muttering about being forcible removed from a building in twenty east." Roland continued. "A patrol cop picked up the info and logged it about three hours ago."

"The skulls were probably paying him to protect them."

He heard Roland snort, he didn't share Bradford's low opinion of cop honesty. Bradford had been there though, he'd earned money that way. Honest cops were poor cops, it was just how it was in San Pablo.

"So, whoever tossed the skulls onto the street is a serious player, serious enough to put the cop off tackling them." Said Bradford. "Give the info to Bobby, he'll know what to do."

"You're sure?"

"Yes and don't forget to ask him about our surplus equipment."

Bradford still had no idea what powered their new craft, but the engines were putting out quite a wash. The hull was armoured and windowless, everything he saw was from various cameras on the outer hull. They passed above a two-masted yacht, their wake making it lean over at a dangerous angle. There would be complaints of course, especially after the rest of the fleet flew over them. The public wanted a safe and secure society, just so long as it didn't inconvenience their lives in the smallest way. The pilot appeared through the door from the cockpit.

"Still an hour from destination." He said. "Any faster and they might detect the heat wash from our engines."

"What energy source do the engines use? My partner was dying to know."

The pilot was grinning.

"Maria, yes we've already given her a memory cube with the system specs. We run as a hybrid system on hydrogen cells and a small toroidal generator."

That just meant power to Bradford, prodigious amounts of it. He thanked the pilot and tried to sleep, he needed to be sharp when they hit the ground.

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There wasn't a lot of twilight in San Pablo, it was full light and then half an hour later, darkness. As it started to get dark they still hadn't brought in her lamp, but her whole plan was based on someone remembering to bring her a night light of some kind.

Amoe positioned herself and patiently waited. Her right arm was out in front of her as she lay on the floor, open fingers, nothing to hide. There was no blanket over her; most of the available bedding was probably full of skin bugs anyway. She looked harmless as she laid there, definitely not someone with a wicked blade under her hand. The door opened and an electric lamp was placed just inside, the sort used during power failures. Amoe opened her eyes just enough to see it was the blonde at the door, good.

"Here's your lamp."

Amoe pretended to be fast asleep, keeping her breathing slow and even. A good minute the blonde gave her to wake up.

“Hey bitch. You don’t want it; I’ll take it away again.”

Amoe was glad it was the blonde; the middle aged guy would have simply left the lamp just inside the door and gone away. The girl had a chip on her shoulder, probably several. She wasn’t about to give up an opportunity to give their captive a hard time.

“Can you hear me ? Do I have to come over there ?”

Amoe watched through a tiny gap between her eyelids, peering through her eyelashes. Someone had called out to the blonde and she turned and shouted along the corridor.

“No, no problem. Rich bitch is pretending to be asleep.”

More comments from the person down the hall, probably the middle aged guy.

“Ok ! Fine !”

The girl didn’t like being told off and Amoe could hear petulance in her words. The lamp was picked up and the blonde walked towards her. Cheap trainers, definitely not from Jimmy’s and blue jeans that ended a good inch above the trainers, perfect. The lamp was put down about two feet from her head.

“You’ve had your fun, I need another picture.”

So that was why the girl had been so persistent. One of the cheap trainers moved and kicked her, none too gently, in the ribs. Amoe moved so quickly that the blonde didn’t have time to react. She used the knife to slice at the heel, the area between trainer and jeans, severing the achilles tendon. Down went the blonde, screaming as she went.

“Leave her alone ! I’ve already warned you.”

His voice, the middle aged guy, obviously misreading the scream. There wasn’t much time, if the blonde shouted out he’d recognise her voice. Amoe straddled the blonde and rammed the blade into her left eye, using all her strength to push it a good four inches into the girls head. The blonde went still, her breathing stopped.

Amoe looked at the door and listened, nothing. She still had a long way to go to get out of the building, but she felt more confident now. She couldn’t look at what she’d done to the girl, she knew that she was likely to throw up. Her hand was still on the last bit of the knife. She pulled it out and wiped it and her hand on the girl’s denim jacket. Still looking anywhere but at the blonde’s head, she went through her jeans pockets. A key card for a vehicle of some kind and about a hundred dollars in assorted notes. It all went into her own pockets.

Amoe picked up the lamp, still avoiding looking anywhere vaguely in the direction of the dead girl. It was them or her, even the middle aged guy who’d been kind to her. Escape was all that she could concentrate on, without going crazy. Knife in her right hand, lamp in her left, she walked out of the room and along the corridor.

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Bradford could see why their VTOL needed a co-pilot and an engineer. AI was still trying to catch up with where it had been before the world nearly died. There was a lot to do as the craft headed towards landing on Lakey Island, too much for a single pilot. He watched on the screen as drones were launched from somewhere near the back of the craft. Small dots on the screen that gave off a huge radar signature to fool defence missiles.

“Landing in five minutes.” Said the pilot over the internal speakers. “I’ll put the left side towards the compound, so exit from the right side doors.”

All hell was about to break loose, but his voice was calm, the diction perfect. Just the sort of voice you want a pilot to have, even if you know he’s feeling as terrified as you are.

Explosions now, the tremors penetrating the hull and visible as orange flashes on the screen. The missiles are falling for the trick with the drones, but not all. They dive down, skimming the waves and putting out lots of old fashioned chaff. It works and the pilot avoids the worst of an explosion that would have been right in their path. They were still ahead of the main fleet, deliberately clearing a path and drawing fire.

“We can’t have any trials.” The President had told him during their private meeting. “Michael Reece using a government lab to create this..... atrocity. Then one of our main bio-med companies goes rogue.”

Bradford knew what Herbert wanted, even without having it confirmed in detail. He did though, the President left him in no doubt.

“You have to kill them all Bradford, all the senior people. Mike Lakey, Greg Halster and Gillian McBride.... None of them can be taken alive.”

A few low level lab techs had to be brought back for trial, the public frowned on anything that looked like deliberate slaughter. The President had made it clear though, he’d prefer it if very few Lakey Pharmaceutical staff survived the raid.

“One minute and we’re on the ground.” Said the pilot.

Fire from the ground now, it didn’t look like the mercenaries were going to run away. A lot of small arms fire that could be heard hitting the hull and at least one rail gun. Not good, their armoured hull would only take so much damage. Someone began firing their weapons, perhaps the flight engineer. The coast of the island was now indistinct on the screen, dazzled by the explosions as the VTOL fired everything it had.

Bradford checked his kit and tried not to think of Amoe. It was almost consoling, knowing that in all probability she was dead by the time her kidnappers contacted her father. There was nothing he could have done anyway. Bobby was a long shot, a very long shot.

“Doors opening.”

They were on the ground and the humidity hit him like being in front of a hot air vent. Maria was with him, as he kept down and looked round the side of their craft. He had no idea what firepower their VTOL packed, but it had flattened the closest building.

“Stay with me.” He said to Maria.

They ran across twenty yards of open ground. Yasmine was on his far right, leading a small group of this year’s intake. Bradford didn’t like bringing trainees to war, but they had so few fully trained staff. They lost no one, not even a scratch and they were into the rubble of the destroyed outbuilding. Less than fifty feet in front of them were the main complex doors. They looked strong, surrounded by surveillance devices and with uncrackable electronic locks. Luckily PD489 had brought their own lock picks.

The main military force was only five minutes behind them and no one wanted to miss the opportunity of being the team to get Mike Lakey. The recent cornucopia of kit they’d received, included several single shot rocket launchers. So light that some of Bradford’s team had two slung across their backs.

“McMurphy !” Shouted Bradford

They had no McMurphy, it was the way they all affectionately referred to Chet, who seemed to enjoy crazy situations. Old movies were still more popular than anything currently being produced in San Pablo and the characters in them almost worshipped. One cadet with a rather over dotting mother, was known as Bates. Chet pulled the dust cap off the end of a rocket launcher and aimed it at the complex’s outer doors. Bradford did wonder if one rocket would get the job done, but it did. A

brief ball of orange flame and the doors had been turned to a pile of burning wood and broken hinges.

“Come on guys.” Shouted Bradford. “No time to applaud McMurphy, we’ll do that later.”

They lost someone during the run to the ruined doors. There was no body left and it was Maria who told him that Diana had just vanished off her tracking device.

“Keep moving !”

They had to be kept moving, they’d have a few beers and mourn her when they were all back home. Diana had stepped on a lightning mine and millions of volts had fried her, until all that was left were a few scorched bones and ligaments. Not the worst way to go, but lightning mines left nothing for people’s families to bury. Through the burning doors and Bradford gave Yasmine her orders.

“Take the team towards Lakey’s office.” He said. “Maria and I will check out the labs. And check your targets, our own military will be coming in from the north.”

“Yes Sir.”

He ran and already he could hear the sound of the military craft bombarding the ground defences. Soon a good two hundred well trained soldiers would be searching the complex and he had to get to Gillian before they did. A sign in front gave direction to the various labs and one arrow pointed to a corridor on their left.

‘Fabrication Workshops.’ It Said.

She’d sent him a message a long time ago, based on an awful lot of assumptions. He just hoped that she’d be there, working on whatever she was building for Mike Lakey. Now there was resistance, a well-armed guard appeared from a doorway and began firing at them. Two Ion blasts tore lumps out of the ceiling, before Maria managed to hit the guard in the chest. They ran past his dead body, Bradford still desperate to get to Gillian. Maria was holding his arm though, slowing him down.

“Where are we going Bradford ? Lakey and his team are to the north.”

“I have to find Gillian before the soldiers, they’ll kill her on sight.”

Maria was in front of him now, her hands in his chest, stopping him from moving.

“So why do you care ?” She asked. “She’s part of this, why save her ?”

“My father told me to.”

He shook his head and stopped trying to push past her. There wasn’t long, but he owed her some kind of explanation.

“This may sound crazy, but I never remembered much about my dad until recently. I knew he was a good guy, but not details, no real feeling about things he’d said or done. Then lately..... well I’ve been remembering stuff he said about family and loyalty.”

Maria was looking at him strangely, he didn’t really blame her.

“Maybe Gillian put stuff in my head, but it feels like she undid something that’s been there a long time. My dad always said you never leave a family member if they’re in trouble, you never betray them and you do all you can to protect them. Family is everything he used to say. Well Gillian McBride is the closest thing I have to family.”

“You know how all this sounds Bradford ?”

“I know, fucking crazy”

Maria removed her hands from his chest and brought up her weapon.

“So she’ll be in the fabrication workshop ?”

“I hope so.”

“Come on then.”

They ran, their communicators crackling with the sounds of soldiers talking somewhere to their left. The main military force wasn't far away, it would make picking targets very difficult. Another sign in from of them.

'Fabrication Workshops.' This time pointing right.

Not far from it they found what they'd been dreading. The dead man wasn't one of their people, he was wearing the all over black clothing that the Lakey hired mercenaries wore. There wasn't a mark on him, but there was no doubt about how he'd died. Someone had used the pathogen on him, his face was just a mass of blood and flesh turned to mush.

"Shit Bradford, we don't even have bio-hazard suits."

"Come on." He replied. "If we'd been infected, we'd be dead by now."

The door with 'Fabrication Workshops,' above it wasn't far away. They ran towards it, both praying that they weren't running towards the source of the terrible disease.

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