

Bradford

Chapter 9 – Juniper Hotel

“She felt guilty; her father had a knack for making her feel guilty. For most of her friends it was their mother who wrapped them up in guilt, for Amoe it was her father.”

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Bradford had heard the old saying about herding cats and he really thought that herding a church outing might actually be harder. The congregation had a strange habit of asking Gerald for his advice and then whining about his answers. Several had tried to transfer the habit to Bradford, but he'd put them straight;

“You want to stay here, fine. Less for me to worry about.”

Gerald's flock had stopped whining at him, though they did occasionally take a verbal poke at Maria. They'd regret it of course; Bradford knew she'd eventually give someone a bruise to remember the day by.

There were enough adults to carry tired children, but they'd made painfully slow progress. Not everyone had Bradford's strength and even a tiny child, can quickly become a heavy burden. Monica had been a problem too. The feisty old lady had turned out to be a decent walker, but she would insist on drinking vast amounts of lemonade. Inevitably it had meant her needing to pee and insisting on the ritual that accompanied her emptying her bladder. First Bradford had to thoroughly look the area over and then Maria had to guard her as she squatted.

Now Bradford was looking at the baggage trolleys in the distance and hoping the power packs hadn't been drained. Like a miniature train, there were about a dozen trolleys, all pulled by an electrically powered cart.

“I see bodies.” Said Maria. “Keep the children back.”

“Time to walk buddy.” Said Bradford.

Eleanor, the seven year old girl had been up on his shoulders for miles. She reluctantly allowed herself to be put on the ground and went to find her younger brother. The children had seen bodies, it had been inevitable in the tunnels, but they were trying to keep their exposure to the worst of it, to a minimum.

“We'll need to get the luggage off it.” Maria Said. “But the power packs still look good for quite a few miles.”

She'd beaten him to the luggage train and taken the inspection hatch off the cart. It was another battle scene, this time between about five students armed with various blunt objects and the Dysto-Guerra. The students hadn't stood a chance, their bodies littered the tunnel. Bradford dragged the bodies to the side of the tunnel and covered them with the bags of luggage.

“One day someone will get down here and give them a proper burial.” He said.

“If the fucking reservists don't bring the tunnel roof down.” Answered Maria.

Her colourful language didn't seem to worry the congregation, though Monica tutted. They checked that all the trolleys looked safe and then the children were put on the front trolley.

“Where we can keep an eye you.” Said Maria.

It was becoming a bit of an adventure and the children seemed happy. None of the adults had looked to be in charge of the children. Bradford had assumed they must be orphans, so he and Maria had begun to look after them.

“All aboard !” Shouted Bradford.

The trolleys were meant for bags, not people. There were webbing hangers though, which could be twisted and sat on. Bradford could hear Gerald's flock moaning at him, as he pressed the foot pedal and they moved forward. The top speed was only about twelve miles an hour, but it was still better than walking.

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Amoe hadn't slept at all. There had been a few seconds, when her eyes had closed, but it hadn't refreshed her at all. Five am and she'd showered and driven over to see her parents, arriving just as the dawn lit up the house. With luck, she'd see her father, have a few bites of breakfast and still be on time for her morning shift. She enjoyed being a cop, even hoped to make it right to the top one day.

"Morning Miss."

She recognised the Guard; he'd worked for her father since she'd been about five years old. He'd become a friend who'd encouraged her interest in joining the police.

"Hi, is my father in the garden?"

"Yes, still goes out there with his morning coffee."

Everyone with money had guards, especially if they'd been involved in local politics. She gave the guard a quick kiss on the cheek and noticed the new guy. He was half hidden inside the front porch, one of the stone columns hiding most of his face. Young this one and new, she'd never seen him before and it hadn't been that long since she'd been home.

"New faces Doug?" She asked.

He rolled his eyes at her, which made her smile.

"The subs are more active Miss. Your father decided to upgrade security a little."

"Last time, the new guys lasted all of a month." She said. "Can you open the side gate? I'll go straight round to the garden."

He ran a card across the lock and let her through. Another new face looking at her from behind a Cedar tree, it was becoming a little strange. Young again this guy and carrying a formidable looking energy weapon. She smiled at him, but he didn't smile back, probably told not to. He looked at the ground and did his best to ignore her completely.

Kealani Lee, her father, had once been happy with being the largest supplier of fresh produce on the island. They'd had two fairly laid back guards then, including Doug. Then her father had decided to become involved in politics and things had become more complicated. First the local councils and on to become a member of the central parliament. He had once stood against President Herbert, hoping to at least get a respectable percentage of the vote. He obtained eight percent on a ninety two percent turnout and never ran for president again.

"Daddy." She shouted.

He was still some distance away, sat at the table near the outdoor cooking area. It was cold, but he always sat there for his morning coffee, even if the morning air was almost freezing. He waved at her and poured a coffee for her.

Amoe had been surprised when she'd seen her father's name on a few police intelligence reports. Politicians made enemies and she'd seen articles in the media that had called him a crook. The police files were different though, there was no political axe to grind. Her father was a little corrupt and realising that had made her cry for almost a week. It was long before Bradford was in her life and her boyfriend then had his own political ambitions. His pragmatic attitude to honesty in high office had been his undoing and Amoe had dumped him soon after.

“Your father is a businessman who doesn’t like paying tax and he’s a politician.” He’d said. “Both of those make it almost certain that he’s guilty of a few sharp practices.”

She remembered the feeling then, of her stomach knotting up.

“Not my father.” She’d replied.

He’d actually laughed at her. What had been his name ? Robert, yes Robert, who’d gone on to work for the public prosecutor.

“Everyone is at it. The only honest politicians are the ones you never hear of, the ones whose careers go nowhere.” He’d said. “Think of the names you hear in the media every day. How many of those would you call honest ?”

She hadn’t replied, she’d cried again and cried for quite a while. Of course he’d been right, which was probably the main reason she’d dumped him.

“Morning Daddy, I knew you’d be out here.”

“Best hour of the day Princess, it’ll be hot and sticky by seven thirty.”

She sat and sipped her coffee, which was excellent. Amoe still loved her father, but something had changed, once she realised he wasn’t a completely good man. Childish maybe, but she was a daddy’s girl and every little girl wants her father to be perfect. Her big worry was that he was about to reveal to her that Bradford was similarly tarnished. She had no idea how she’d deal with that.

“You can’t go without eating with us.” Said Kealani Lee. “It would really upset your mother. It must be four weeks at least since you’ve been home.”

She felt guilty; her father had a knack for making her feel guilty. For most of her friends it was their mother who wrapped them up in guilt, for Amoe it was her father.

“Sorry, I’ve had a lot of late shifts.” She said. “And I’m seeing quite a bit of Bradford.”

“Ahh yes Bradford, the guy who seems to keep you awake at nights.” Said Kealani. “I do wonder how good he is for you Princess.”

“He reminds me of you in many ways.....How Mom said you used to be.”

He laughed and seemed amused by her reply. Her father was one of those people who seemed to be constantly watching for something. He looked behind him and exchanged a nod with one of the new guards.

“I hold most of my important meeting out here now.” He said. “The house is swept for bugs every week, but the technology gets better all the time, or worse, depending on how you look at it. The trees round the outside stop snoopers with hand held microphones. Did you know some of those can hear you whisper from a mile away ?”

She got up and moved her chair next to his. Holding his hand and talking in just a whisper.

“Tell me Daddy. What is Bradford doing ?”

“It’s dangerous knowledge to know. I never have less than four armed guards these days, sometimes six. As a cop though, you’re out on the street. It would be so easy for someone to arrange an accident, or for you to simply vanish.”

“Tell me Daddy ! I promise to keep it secret.”

“Even from Bradford ? He must never know that you’re aware of what he really does for a living. That could be hard for you, if he ends up being a keeper.”

“He is a keeper, I love him.”

There were noises from the house and her mother was shivering and waving from the kitchen door.

“You two have five minutes. Don’t you dare miss breakfast.” Her mother called.

“Don’t worry, I’ll have her there in a minute or two.”

He was deciding, Amoe had seen the look before. When she'd wanted a puppy and later the pony. He was weighing up the harm and the good of whatever way his decision went.

"My people check the garden." He said. "I'm fairly sure we can talk in private, but you can never be sure. That is part of the problem with modern San Pablo, you can never be sure of anything. There are surveillance drones the size of a hornet. One could be in the cedar trees, right now."

She didn't say anything, she knew he was about to tell her what she wanted to know.

"I'd love to say it all started with President Herbert, but it didn't." He said. "My party were in power and we still called the head of state the Chancellor. The gangs and subversives had created no go areas in the heart of San Pablo and the people wanted action. PD489 was created as an elite police team, dedicated to eradicating the gang problem and the growing threat from subversives."

"And Bradford is a member of PD489?" She asked.

"He is, a squad leader now and I'm told, a personal friend of President Herbert."

"I knew it."

"PD489 were out in the open then." Her father continued. "The public didn't like the gangs, but they didn't like all the media coverage of cops killing gang members. They were a success though and the Chancellor at the time didn't want the gangs to rule San Pablo again. PD489 was officially disbanded, but really went underground. A secret police department that reported only to the top level of government and made up of mostly part time operatives."

Amoe had worried about Bradford being in bed with President Herbert, helping with his shady deals, acting as some kind of enforcer. A squad leader of PD489, keeping the subversives in control..... it was fine.....perfect."

"So he's fighting the kind of people who bombed Joyce's Green?" She asked.

"Yes and proving to be very effective, from what few bits of gossip I hear."

Perfect, heroic! She'd keep it secret, it explained so many of his lies to her.

"Come on." Said her father. "Let's eat breakfast, before your mother grills the bacon until it's like boot leather."

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Considering they were underground and using a makeshift link to a temporary military transmitter, the voice of Roland was incredibly clear.

"The raids are still going on." He said. "We took Astrid Cerone's place apart and she was obsessed with Samuel, drawings of him everywhere."

"Do her parents know anything?" Asked Bradford.

"No, they claim to have noticed nothing unusual about her behaviour."

"Have the interrogators push them a little."

"But..... her father is in the military." Said Roland.

One of us he meant, on our side. Bradford had heard it all before, friends and family always claimed to be mystified when a relative killed hundreds of total strangers. It was a way of coping, forgetting the tell-tale signs and those little changes in behaviour. They'd know something, might not even realise they knew it.

"Don't lobotomise them Roland. Just get interrogation to use a low level truth drug."

"They were developed from sedatives anyway." Added Maria.

"Fine, I'll pass on your orders."

Roland sounded huffy, perfect, all they needed.

"Anything useful in the girl's flat?" Asked Bradford.

“She knew about you. There are several doodles of a cop, with Bradford written underneath. The doodles show you being killed in several inventive ways. Obviously they’ll all be kept well away from the media.”

“Nothing else ?” Asked Maria.

They could hear Roland rummaging through paperwork.

“She kept a journal, but that’s all about the men in her life. She kept a star rating system, it appears Samuel got the full five stars.”

“See how many you can identify and bring them in.” Said Bradford.

“Will do. We’ve already brought in five, she was a busy girl.”

“So was I.” Added Maria. “It’s what being a student it all about.”

They chuckled, while there were more sounds of rummaging from Roland’s end of the connection.

“Hmm.... Does Juniper mean anything to either of you ?” Asked Roland.

“Why ? What did you find.” Said Bradford.

“She has a few pictures in her journal. All hand drawn and quite good, the girl had talent.” Said Roland. “Two have the word Juniper, entwined in leaves and flowers. Another has a picture of a ruined building, with Juniper underneath.”

“I know it well.” Said Bradford. “A hotel in the wrong area, used to be Juniper lodge, then renamed Juniper Hotel. It still lost money, so it was bought by a chain and called The Juniper Resort. They eventually gave up on making it pay and it’s been abandoned for years. It’s where I had my fight with Samuel and picked up the scar across my gut.”

“So, he’s gone back there.” Said Maria.

“Makes senses.” Added Roland. “No one is likely to think he’d use the place again. I’ll look it up in the records and notify the local cops, ask them to look the place over.”

There was daylight in the distance, reflecting off the tunnel wall and something in their way, maybe bodies. Bradford eased up on the foot pedal and brought them to a halt.

“Not the cops Roland.” He said. “You’ll just get them killed and Samuel will vanish again. Use military drones, ask them to use the ones which can identify speech patterns. If they give you any trouble...”

“I know, threaten them with a call from the president.”

“Yep, but don’t over use that trick.” Said Bradford. “You won’t find much in the files on Juniper Hotel Roland, some of what went on there was a little extreme, even for us. Little was put in the official report. I have to go now; we look to be near the coastal exit.”

Bradford kept the children back, herding them towards Gerald.

“It may be bad ahead, can you get someone to look after them ?” Asked Maria.

When it came to anything serious, they stopped whining. A middle aged lady and Monica, corralled the kids and kept them busy. Bradford and Maria approached something that stretched right across the tunnel and looked like bodies from a distance.

“Definitely bodies, lots of them.” Said Bradford.

The tunnel entrance was close, round a corner though, so they couldn’t see it. It had to be after dawn, there was enough light to see the bodies clearly and there were about thirty of them.

“Blood still goeey and wet.” Said Maria. “This is recent.”

A mixture of subversives and soldiers, young soldiers, the bodies still lay as they’d fallen. Some had been still, but there were marks in the dust, where some had twisted and contorted in the throes of death. It wasn’t until he saw the boxes of provisions and the medical kits that the truth dawned on Bradford.

“It’s our rescue team.” He said. “The soldiers and medics that the DisOps sent to rescue us.”

Bradford looked over the bodies, looking for the slightly better quality fatigues, the ones worn by flight crew. He spotted the pilot of the transport they'd come in and checked his neck for a pulse. Maria misunderstood his intentions and began checking the others for signs of life. Bradford left her to it and searched the pilot's pockets, finding the key card in his top jacket pocket.

"Not a total loss." He said. "Their transport will be outside and the supplies look undamaged."

"Can you fly it?" Asked Maria.

He gave her a cheeky grin and noticed how filthy her face was, he must have looked the same.

"Well." He said. "I don't have a license, but I can get us out of here. You'd better tell Ginger that his people have been killed. And get a headcount, in case someone has wandered off wounded."

Gerald wandered over as they were checking the bodies, though all of them were cooling and showed no sign of life.

"Terrible, terrible." Said Gerald. "I see death all the time, but not like this..... so young. Is there any way I can help?"

"The supplies and medical kits look fine." Said Maria. "The food and drink can be given out."

"Not too much drink to Monica." Added Bradford.

The blaster shot hit Gerald in the face as he laughed. His face instantly became a boiling mist of vaporised blood, bone and sinews. A fraction of a second later, the inside of his skull boiled. His brain became a liquefied mess of hot liquid and when his skull could no longer withstand the internal pressure, it exploded. It all took far less than a second to happen.

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Dawn hit San Pablo and found Yasmine tired and irritable. She was one of a few trained scene of crime operatives, one of the few to not ruin evidence by walking all over it. Dragged out of bed to help in the raids on Astrid Cerone's recent lovers, she suffered from fatigue and a little jealousy. She'd seen a picture of Astrid and the girl had looked..... Ok, but the six guys they'd already dragged off for interrogation, had been really hot. Yasmine hadn't even had the almost obligatory pestering from Gupta!

"Security Services!" Shouted Schneider.

He shouted it as he kicked the door in, they all wanted to get home to their beds. The first guy had taken a good ten minutes to open his door and he'd called his lawyer. There would be claims for damages of course, but busting down doors saved a lot of time. Yasmine rushed in behind the team, keeping her head down and praying that no one started shooting at them.

"Stand still! Identify yourself." Someone was shouting.

She was looking up the stairs as he came out of the bedroom, another vision of male perfection.

Dressed in just boxer shorts, his body was darn near perfect. How the hell had Astrid done it?

Maybe they had lessons on how to give the perfect blowjob in college now? Yasmine was beginning to hate the girl and her back catalogue of picture perfect hunks.

"My name is Don Truscott. What do you want? I'm just a student."

"Cuff the bastard and get him in the APC!" Shouted Yasmine.

Schneider ignored his protests and cuffed Don, bundling him down the stairs. Yasmine had to step aside to let them pass, smiling as she heard him thrown into the back of the APC. It had been a long night, but she had to give his room in student housing the once over. Up the stairs and to the right, his door would need a new lock and the frame repaired. A small room with a wardrobe, bed and a small sink in the corner. The floor was covered in dirty washing, she stepped carefully round it all, anything might be evidence. She couldn't help looking at her profile in the full length wardrobe mirror.

“Not bad girl.” She muttered. “Too good to be spending your nights watching old movies.”

It had to be because she was a strong woman. Men obviously had a problem dealing with strong women. Tiredness was what she later put it down to. The reason why it took her so long to notice the military Ion weapon under the bed. She pressed her communicator.

“Schneider, be careful. Found weapons in his room.”

“No problem, he’s already unconscious.”

Yasmine liked high powered weapons, found them to be almost beautiful. She pulled the Ion rifle out from under the bed and let it rest on top on the dirty linen.

“Oh wow, maybe Bradford will let me keep it.”

Not such a weird idea, he’d let Schneider keep the rail gun he’d taken off the gangs. It was expensive looking and far more advanced than anything they currently used. She lay on the floor and used her flashlight to look right under the bed. There was the usual dust covered sock and a small heap of porno mags. Behind them was another blaster, a small one and at least three grenades. She stood and called Roland.

“Don Truscott has weapons and explosives. Can you send someone to help me ?”

“Gupta is here.”

She sighed, of all the people, it had to be Gupta.

“Ok, get him here as quickly as you can.”

Yasmine was alert now, all tiredness had left her. She surveyed the room, picking the best spot to start looking through everything and getting it bagged up. The wardrobe was tempting, as was the slightly crooked set of bedside drawers. In the end she started picking through the objects on a shelf beside the bed. There was a worn and yellowing postcard in a female hand, showing a hotel against a rocky coastline. The card looked antique, but it had been posted quite recently.

‘See you soon, you’ll love it here.’

‘Astrid xx’

Probably nothing, but she logged the card from The Juniper Resort onto the central database.

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Bradford had seen it happen before. Three targets for the enemy to choose from and he’d ignored Bradford and Maria and chosen Gerald. Gerald was the tallest and the most animated, from a distance he’d have looked like the commander. He wasn’t proud of it, but he was using the bodies of two young soldiers as cover. Maria wasn’t far away, lying on the floor behind the body of a subversive.

“Were you hit ?” He asked.

“No, they just got poor Gerald.”

They, was it a they or just one lone sub ? He didn’t need to tell the church outing to take cover, they’d all vanished. Probably crouching behind the trolleys, he hoped they hadn’t run back down the tunnels.

“Might just be one of them.” He called to Maria.

She was looking over the dead body, staring at the tunnel entrance. Probably by pure luck, their enemy had the light to their advantage. The morning sun was shining into the tunnel entrance and dazzling them.

“There’s a doorway.” Said Maria. “Probably a maintenance room. I think they’re in there.”

He couldn’t see it; the angle was a bit wrong. Bradford tried to shuffle along the floor to get a better view and their enemy opened up with prolonged blaster fire. Most of it went wide, hitting the

ceiling, or vanishing down the tunnel. A few shots hit the dead bodies, but none were within feet of Bradford or Maria.

“One guy in a panic.” Said Bradford. “Getting Gerald was a lucky shot.”

“Or it might be half a dozen really bad shots.”

“Nah, one guy.”

“Don’t stake your life on it.” Said Maria.

Strange, because he was about to do just that. All blasters had a self-recharge point after a certain number of blasts had been fired. It might be after twenty shots or a hundred but they all reached that point. There’d be a recharge whine and pulling the trigger would do nothing for about thirty seconds.

“Agitate him a bit Maria.” He said. “Get him to run his blaster until it recharges. Then cover me.”

“No Bradford, no ! He might have another weapon, even if it is one guy.”

“What option do we have ? Wait for him to die of old age. Cover me !”

Bradford started moving about and firing, as did Maria. Their enemy was obviously worried about their activity and fired shot after shot at them, all going wide of where they were. Bradford was counting and at the seventy fifth shot, he heard the familiar whine of a blaster hitting recharge.

“Now !” Shouted Bradford. “Keep firing at him, keep his head down !”

Normally he’d have zigzagged, but he didn’t want to run into Maria’s shots. Bradford kept low and ran as fast as he could. He quickly saw the face of his enemy and the fear in his eyes. If he’d had a second weapon, he certainly showed no sign of trying to use it. Bradford ran and heard the recharge whine stop and saw his enemy smile. Too late though, Bradford dived at him and hit him hard on the forehead. Bradford landed on top of the now unconscious subversive.

“Are you ok ?”

Maria was just behind him, still gasping for breath from the run. Bradford nodded at her and kicked the blaster away from the sub, looking him over as he did so.

“That leg will need to be amputated, but he’ll live.” He said.

“A last survivor from the battle in the tunnel.” Said Maria. “His leg is ruined, but he had the sense to use his belt as a tourniquet.”

The leg had been hit by a blaster right on the knee joint. Everything was shattered and all that was left was a useless mass of shredded tissue. The subversive began to come round and start muttering. Maria held her blaster to his head and looked at Bradford.

“Do we take him back alive, or was he killed in an exchange of fire ?” She asked.

It was so tempting to let Maria pull the trigger. They had the children to find and Gerald’s flock might well have run off. A badly injured prisoner was just another problem.

“We’ll take him.” He said. “He might know something useful and he’s the only live sub we’ve found.”

They bound the sub’s hands and Maria made sure his home made tourniquet was nice and tight. The lack of blood would start his leg decomposing, but it was useless anyway. It took another forty minutes to round up the church outing and get them on board the military transport.

“On the floor.” Maria told them. “There aren’t enough seats for everyone, so sit on the floor.”

Bradford was enjoying himself. He’d done hours on flight simulators, but very few in the real thing. He put the engines up to half power and the vertical take-off craft, rose gently into the air.

“I need the bathroom.” Said Monica.

Bradford gently levelled the craft and let the forward speed build.

“Won’t be long Monica.” He said. “We’ll be at the reservist’s camp in a few minutes.”

“But I need to go NOW !”

“Then it looks like we’ll have a wet patch on the floor.”

It was almost exactly mid-day, when Gregory sent her an internal message that they’d confirmed the marker in what he was calling the ‘Gregory Strain.’ She didn’t begrudge him a little bit of ego massaging, he had found what they were all searching for. She’d phoned him straight away and congratulated him.

“Fantastic work Greg, I’ll never moan about you being stubborn again.”

“Yes you will.”

He was right of course.

“Well, yes I probably will.” She’d admitted.

The teams were copying her in on everything they were finding and the data was building fast. Like a thought catalyst, just knowing the right marker was creating gigabytes of medical results and speculation. Mike Lakey was copied in on the good news, but hadn’t called her. Much to her surprise.

“I’m going out.” Tamara had said. “Can I get you anything ?”

“No, I have a real taste for something unhealthy, something fried.”

Tamara looked at her as though she’d sworn and left.

Gillian had found eggs and bacon in the security guys fridge. Officially it was for their early morning breakfasts, but to hell with it. LabSync4 had paid for it. She burned a skillet cooking her impromptu feast and now, at one fifteen, she was in her office, with three eggs, half a pound of cooked bacon and two slices of fried bread.

“I needed that.” She muttered after eating the first mouthful.

The phone rang and she knew it was Mike Lakey. Gillian picked it up.

“Gillian McBride here.”

“Secure line now please.”

Damn it was as though he was watching her. He was, had to be ! She looked up at the small security camera in her office and the little green light was on. She was tempted to wave, but was unsure how Mike would deal with that. Badly was likely.

“Of course Mike, I’ll go straight away.”

He’d gone and the little green light on the camera went out. The petty little bastard really was watching for the most inconvenient moment to call. Their security network was supposed to be in house only, but Mike Lakey signed off the pay for the IT department. It was fairly obvious that nothing was secure now and she’d have to watch what she said. Gillian walked into the office with the secure connection and sat in front of the screen.

“Congratulations Gillian.” Said Mike. “I only hire the best; I knew you’d find it.”

“Actually it was Greg; everyone is calling it the ‘Gregory Strain.’

Mike was actually smiling at her and Shereen was nowhere to be seen.

“Don’t be modest Gillian. You put the team together; you gave Greg your full support. So talk me through it, assume I’m a complete bio-pathogen novice.”

He had everything, every note. So why this charade ? She could only assume he was recording it to show to potential buyers of the bio-weapon. Still, she had no option than to do as he asked.

“Several years ago a virus began to appear among the prison community. It has an official designation, but became known simply as prison belly.” She said. “I now believe it to have been a deliberately altered form of the long known norovirus.”

“Go on.” Prompted Mike.

"I'm guessing, but I'm fairly certain that Michael Reece was involved in the weaponising of the virus, or it was work he knew about. That is why the marker was obvious to him."

"If you have one weapon against undesirables, why invent another?" Asked Mike.

"It didn't work!" Said Gillian. "Assuming that it was supposed to kill them. There is strong evidence that it was never intended to wipe out convicts or subversives. It was incredibly good at only infecting those groups though."

"Go on Gillian."

"Again I'm guessing Mike, but I imagine the prison inmates were infected via their food. Prison Belly is very hard to pass on to another person, it requires prolonged close contact with an infected person." She said. "A few wives have contracted the disease, but very few children of released convicts."

"And the infection of the subversives." Said Mike. "How was that achieved?"

"Pure speculation now Mike. You'd need a military scientist to confirm it, but my guess is an airborne spray. Maybe from what looked like surveillance drones." She said. "Again the infection of those outside the subversive groups has been tiny, less than a tenth of a percent of the overall population."

"So, why are you saying it didn't work?"

He had to be recording the conversation for others to see, he knew she hadn't really meant that.

"No Mike, it might have done exactly what it was intended to do." She said. "Prison Belly is fatal in less than one infection per thousand. In a large penitentiary, they get about three or four deaths from the virus, per year. It gets put on the system, but no one begins to look at it as a potential epidemic. More are killed by food poisoning, or simple infections."

"Get to the bottom line." Urged Mike.

"The people who demonstrate against the government, tend to be the subversives. The people who commit most crimes, tend to be ex-convicts. If you wanted to weaken and quieten down those groups.... Prison belly is perfect." She said. "No epidemic investigation, no panic among the general population. Just a lot of very sick and unwell criminals and subs."

He was grinning at her now. He knew the implication of what Greg had found. The government had found a way to cut the balls off the dangerous third of the population, without actually killing most of them.

"But they're not all weakened. The subversives are still a threat."

It was her turn to grin.

"The human body is a superb, self-healing machine Mike. Resistances build up, individuals gain some tolerance to the symptoms. In a few generations, prison belly may be no worse than catching the common cold."

He was nodding, not to her, but to someone else in the room at his end. She knew better than to ask who it was.

"Which brings us onto the new pathogen, which Michael M Reece has created?" Prompted Mike.

"Michael was creating the new pathogen for LabSinc4." Said Gillian. "A new type or organism that would be immune to the effect of modern anti-bacterial drugs and virus inhibitors. We were asked to create the pathogen for a client and make sure it only killed subversives."

"But Reece went beyond his brief."

Beyond his brief! That was an understatement. Reece had turned traitor and attempted to sell the new organism to a third party. A third party as yet unknown. When Gillian thought about it, she'd

always assumed the pathogen was being created for the military, but perhaps that was a wrong assumption.

“Yes Mike, Michael Reece created two strains of the organism. The Fravashi organism, which kills only those with the marker. It just kills subversives, convicts and a few of their close family members. The second Adrasteia organism kills anyone who doesn’t have the marker. It kills everyone who isn’t a subversive.”

Again Mike was nodding to someone to one side of the screen.

“And the mortality rate of this pathogen ?” Asked Mike.

“It’s not like anything else we’ve seen Mike and large scale trials are of course, impossible.” She replied. “From what we’ve seen it kills everyone it infects and kills them within two minutes.”

“Just a moment Gillian.”

The screen went dead and she waited, while he was obviously talking to whoever else was in the room with him. It took a full eight minutes for him to reappear.

“We have the organism in the cherish vaults.” Said Mike. “We need you and Gregory to come here, to the central Lakey Pharmaceuticals lab.”

More nodding to whoever was there, before he continued.

“Send everything on your computers to us and then have them wiped and all physical records destroyed.”

“But Mike that’s years of research.”

“Do it Gillian, just fucking do it. I expect you and Gregory to be here within two days. No one else, just the two of you and don’t tell any of the other staff where you’re going. Is all that clear ?”

“Yes Mike.”

Gillian was shaking as she went back to her office. Even if she ran they could use the new organism without her, they didn’t really need Greg. It was all there in the information they’d been sent. Mike Lakey, the most unstable man she’d ever met.... Had the power to destroy everything.

“Bradford.” She muttered.

She had one advantage, maybe two if Bradford had loyalty to her and not LabSinc4. She knew where half the secret cherish vaults were located. Only the CEO ever knew that and even she didn’t know where the other half were. No IT guy knew, no lab worker, not even Greg.

Gillian picked up her phone and tapped in the location of cherish vault C. She added a quick note that it held the solution to the pathogen problem and the treason of Michael Reece. She selected Bradford to receive the message and pressed send.

“All bridges thoroughly burned.”

No going home now, Bradford might have a team outside her home within the hour. No returning to her lonely, boring, but relatively safe life. She had an escape case in her locker, enough essentials in the way of clothing to last a week. Gillian used the internal phone.

“I’ll need the plane ready to leave in ten minutes. To go to Lakey Pharmaceuticals head office.”

“Yes Miss McBride.”

Mike would like her arriving quickly, take it as a sign of her submission.

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Gupta looked at the bedroom ceiling and wondered why he was wide awake at midday. He hadn’t got to bed until nine am and even then he hadn’t had much sleep.

“Get into the office by five.” Roland had told him. “Just for a quick debrief.”

It wasn’t his bedroom ceiling, which was the strange and totally unexpected thing. The ceiling, bedroom and rest of the apartment.... Belonged to Yasmine.

Of all the women at PD489, she had to be the last he'd expected to sleep with. He was a bit nervous of her; she looked the sort to complain about sexual harassment, if he just asked her out. Plus Bradford didn't like her and Gupta had to admit being swayed in many of his views by Bradford. The glitter fairy Bradford had called her before he'd become their boss. Now he was fair and polite to all the staff and insults seemed to have been left for Maria to deliver. Yasmine was a bit noisy and full of herself, she'd spent twenty minutes telling him that her bedroom curtains were hand made. But she had been a good lover, she'd even gone down on him. Why had she chosen him to sleep with ? Yasmine had once told an intern that she only slept with those of Captain's rank or above. Gupta admitted to being right at the bottom of the pecking order, a first year trainee. Gupta remembered the saying about gift horse and mouth. He kissed Yasmine on the forehead and went back to sleep.

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