

Bradford

Chapter 1 – Pest Control

“As a child, Bradford’s father had taken him for walks around their town. He’d taken him right to the top of Cemetery Hill and pointed out parts of town, declaring that; ‘There be dragons son.’ It was a game, a way to amuse a child that cost nothing but a little shoe leather. Those trips changed young Bradford and set him on his path through life. He looked at those areas of town and made a solemn promise to his father; ‘One day I’ll kill all the monsters in our town.’ He was only seven years old, but it was a promise he intended to keep.”

⊖

Bradford woke early, he always did on the days he worked for PD489, the police department responsible for pest control. He looked at the bedside clock and he was happy that his internal clock had woken him at about the right hour. He turned the other way and saw the back of a woman’s head. Amoe, a fellow cop who he’d shared a bed with three times in the last month. Were they now dating ? Bradford wasn’t sure of the etiquette in such matters, but most of the other cops were treating them as a couple, an ‘item’ as an intern had put it. She was pretty and made him laugh and the sex was good. So why was he nervous about calling her his girl friend ? Things had already changed. The first two times she’d stayed, her clothes had ended up as a pile on the floor. Now he could see them, neatly folded on the bedside chair, her gun laid on top. He moved towards her, putting a hand on her hip and kissing her neck, hoping she’d wake up.

“Good morning.” He whispered.

Nothing, no response at all. It was a time that most people would think of as the middle of the night, but Bradford needed to shower and dress. He had no problem with leaving Amoe in his home, she was a fellow cop. There was nothing in his home to link him to PD489, apart from a piece of paper in his wall safe. He just felt bad about leaving without telling her. He kissed her ear and still she slept soundly. The alarm clock began its gentle buzz, which would quickly become a deafening shriek. He hit the button to turn it off and got out of bed.

“I’ll write you a note.” He muttered at the woman under the bedding.

Girlfriends had always been problematic. He enjoyed the company of women and they appeared to like him, but it was the job. He always consoled himself by thinking it was the job, but deep down, Bradford knew he was different. He’d dated a nurse, mainly because he’d seen quite a bit of her after an assignment had gone wrong.

“My God, these wounds ! They’re almost medieval.” She’d said.

LabSinc4 had done a good job on his ‘alteration,’ but he still had scars that refused to heal. Jenny had become obsessed with his scars, asking more and more questions. It was a natural curiosity and showed she cared, but he made an excuse to stop seeing her after six months. Her mother had called, saying that Jenny was worried he might be a criminal of some kind. Maybe she’d been right ? He was a criminal, employed by the government and working for a department that didn’t officially exist.

Bradford walked into the bathroom and examined himself in the full length mirror. The scars were bad, though he wore them the way most cops wore medals. A particularly ragged scar across his chest reminded him of the subversives he’d cleaned out of an old hotel on the coast. Another reminded him of Samuel and his mood changed. Samuel was rare, Samuel had not only survived

their meeting, he'd had the luck to escape. Bradford pointed his finger at the mirror and traced out the scar Samuel had given him.

"One day Samuel, one day." He muttered.

He showered and then cleaned his teeth and swilled a capful of mouthwash around his teeth and gums. After shaving and combing his hair, he looked at himself in the mirror.

"Not bad for an old guy of twenty five." He muttered.

His uniform was made entirely of manmade fabrics, but that was what public servants had put up with since time immemorial. Cheap uniforms and a gun made by the lowest bidder. Anything better and some damn politician would be shouting about wasting public money. Not that Bradford hated politicians; he couldn't remember actually hating anyone. Once dressed he went to the wall safe and removed his own gun, a Henriksen 80, almost identical to Amoe's. The police were just going through the change from energy weapons when he'd joined the academy. Now they all used projectile weapons again and the world was once again seeing and hearing the sound of gunfire on the nine pm news.

"Smart bullets," his instructor had told them, "they can actually tell the difference between a kid going to school and a gang thug."

How they did it was a mystery to Bradford, but the public liked them. Bystander deaths had gone down by around seventy percent in the first year. That meant less pictures of dead civilians on TV and everyone liked that. The bullets weren't perfect, people tended to jump about and confuse them and each round cost a small fortune. But you couldn't argue with seventy percent less dead and injured non-combatants. Of course there was a downside; there was also a twenty percent drop in the number of dead criminals arriving at the mortuary. The public appeared to like that too, but most cops, including Bradford, viewed that as a negative.

He looked around his lounge for something to write on, but there was nothing; even the free TV guide had been thrown out.

"Christ ! You clean more often than Mum." His sister had once told him.

He had his cop notebook, but the pages were numbered and he dreaded to think of the number of forms he'd have to fill in, to account for the missing page. He might even end up having to attend a refresher paperwork course with the idiots in personnel. Then he saw the cereal box, lined up with all the other potential breakfast foods. He hated cereal, but felt it was something that normal people had and Bradford badly wanted to appear normal. He reached into the cupboard and pulled out a large fruit bowl and emptied the cereal into it, simply throwing it away wasn't an option. He needed to be fast and alert today and didn't need even the slightest pang of..... no! He ripped a panel off the box and wrote on the clean inside.

'Had to go out early, on special duties today.

Will call you later. How about dinner on Friday?

Bradford xx'

He wrote it and then added the two kisses. Women had always mystified him, but he was getting the hang of them a bit better these days. He placed the box against her gun, so that Amoe would see it as soon as she woke up. Bradford turned to leave, but then knelt next to her and kissed her forehead. He looked at her for about a minute, observing every feature of her sleeping face. She was special to him, but he found it impossible to really know why. Perhaps it would work with a fellow cop, as long as she didn't get too curious. He kissed her again.

"Please learn to accept you can never know all my life." He muttered.

He left his apartment and took the lift down to the car park, or bike park as it was for him. His bike was right under one of the lighting units and only twenty feet from a camera, so it had never been interfered with since he'd lived there. He swung his leg over the powerful bike and entered his code into a keypad just behind the speedo. Everything came to life including the comms unit. PD489 would have already entered 'On Special Duties,' into his diary, but Bradford thought it was polite to let his boss know too. One area controller had become annoyed at his constant time away from normal duties and he'd had a tough six months. Eventually two suits had come in for a quiet word with the controller and he'd been left alone again.

'Bradford Scott 1176E – All day – Special Duties.' He entered.

1176E was his cop number, which had amused Penny, the nurse. She'd even called him Mr 1176E for a while. The computer asked for him to swipe his ID card to verify, not unusual, it did that about every two weeks or so. He took his ID from his wallet and ran the back of it over the comms unit.

"Verified, have a nice day." Said the automatic voice of the central computer.

Special duties covered a lot of things and most cops spent some time every month assigned to it. It could mean witness protection, escorting a politician, or simply covering for a sick officer in another department. Cops were bent, there was no denying it. Bradford certainly couldn't have afforded his apartment, without the little 'extras' that looking the other way brought in. So, no one directly asked the cops to guard anyone or protect witnesses, too many witnesses ended up dead. All special duties were handled and booked centrally, by a department of incorruptible senior cops, if such people actually existed. Far fewer witnesses ended up dead and Bradford could work for PD489 and everyone thought he was looking after snitches.

"Morning Bradford, you be careful on that thing."

"I will Emily."

Emily the lady from fifth floor, apartment H. Nice lady, another public servant. She drove an old car that sometimes let her down, so he waited until it started. Few public employees could afford the rent, but he'd heard Emily was an Oncologist at the local hospital. He only saw her when he left early; she seemed to always get the early shift. Bradford pressed the starter button and enjoyed the feel of the powerful engine coming to life. Electric bikes were the in thing and they were cheaper to run, but Bradford liked the power of his hydrogen cell bike and the quick throttle response. Two hundred and twenty horsepower was insane on two wheels, but he got to places very quickly.

"With the insane traffic in San Pablo, you ride that every day ?!" Amoe had asked him.

"It's fun and I can get round the buses and the jams on the expressway."

In truth, Bradford could think faster and react faster than anyone he was likely to meet on the expressway. He still had to be careful and he never took silly chances. But what was the use of having an upgraded body if you didn't use it ? He went up the ramps out of the car park and waited for the automatic gate to rise. Then he was on a the road and felt a kind of freedom, a rush of adrenalin as he drove up his street and headed for the San Pablo Civic Centre. Speed limits he took as advisory only, after all, what was the point in having cop privileges, if you didn't use them ?

~

~

"Morning officer. Police parking is on the 4th level, rows K to M."

Every morning he'd been to the Civic Centre it was the same words from the guy on the gate.

Bradford ignored it of course and parked his bike outside the office of sanitation. Yes, he really did work next to the office that took care of roaches and bed bugs, somehow it seemed appropriate.

Sanitation were in building forty six and Parks and Recreation were in building forty eight. Bradford walked down a path between them and through the doors of building forty seven. That was it, just a

sign that said 'Building 47.' In large blue lettering. No name, it had been decided that might lead to confused public servants bothering them. It was strange that no one had ever been curious, no politician had ever enquired about them. PD489 had well over a hundred thousand square feet of office space and a garage. Yet it might as well have been invisible, but that was how it was with public buildings, people ignored them.

"Morning Bradford. Sorry it's scanning day."

Chet was on duty and Bradford had been expecting it, the last full body scan had been weeks before. No one really knew what they were looking for, it was all part of the process and procedure of working for PD489.

"Do I need to undress for this one Chet?"

"No, just go into cubicle four and stand in the circle."

He did as he was asked and waited until the scanner beeped, indicating it had finished. No results, no piece of paper saying 'Congratulation Bradford, you don't have Dengue fever,' or whatever they were looking for.

"You still owe me twenty for Yasmine's collection." Said Chet

"She's only been here a month, why are we buying her flowers?"

"If you want to organise the collections, be my guest."

"No, no, here you are."

Bradford took a twenty from his wallet and put it on the reception desk, the picture of President Herbert smiling up at him. The Pacific Dollar had been revalued, lowered, raised and rationalised so many times, that a Herbert wasn't worth much.

"Is Maria in yet?" He asked.

"Yes, beat you by ten minutes today."

Maria was his partner and his friend, he genuinely liked her. There were times, when she was trying to get the promotion that he really deserved.... but he liked her. Not in a girl meets boy and they fuck kind of like. There were times, as she leaned into the water cooler. A male part of his brain twanged and went into overdrive. But he had that under control and it was crazy to get involved with anyone you were partnered with. Women were far too easy to piss off and Maria owned at least six hand guns.

"Damn lights!" He muttered.

The corridor lights had once turned off completely and come back on when anyone triggered a motion detector. There had been a few injuries in the semi dark, as the lights warmed up. Now the main lighting was left at a dull glow and brightened as needed. It still annoyed Bradford. Planet earth had been cursed by prophecy so many times, so many apocalypses, but none had taken. There had been the three or four mass migrations, the end of cheap fossil fuel. The planet had even survived the sea level rise that had brought about the end of the USA. None of the old world power blocks now remained and the racial groups had mixed. Not out of choice of course, it had been unavoidable as old structures broke apart and the concept of nationality became meaningless, or almost meaningless.

"Morning Bradford." Said Maria. "Was there a dead dog on the expressway?"

She was looking at the clock, knowing it would drive him crazy.

"You have the advantage of that new Expressway. The one they built right into the ghetto."

It was their usual sniping and would go on all day. Maria went to the coffee machine and brought him a cup, first in did the coffee. It cost a fortune, but they both enjoyed the luxury of real coffee.

“Earth has survived at least a dozen major eco events. Would it hurt if the damn lights stayed on once someone arrived in the office ?” He fumed.

They never joked or talked about the limited nuclear war in Asia, no one ever joked about that. That really had come far too close to giving mankind the final hurrah.

“What have they got for us today ?” He asked.

He pulled weapons from a rack as Maria pushed their mission off her desk computer and onto the big screen. No one else would be in the office for over an hour and they both enjoyed having the place to themselves. He recognised the area east of the airport coming up on the screen, an area of twenty square miles, most of it snake infested desert. Maria let the central computer give her summary of the assignment in her usual boring monotone.

‘Tracking has picked up at least twenty voices in the abandoned bunkers. Three are known subversives, members of Dysto-Guerra.’

As the voice droned on, Bradford watched their graffiti being shown on the screen. You couldn’t go into any car park in San Pablo, without seeing their tag. Dysto with Guerra underneath, all surrounded by red flames. Sometimes they just wrote Dystopia with a large question mark after it. Bradford didn’t understand it, the nation had never been so happy, so content;

Dystopia;

An imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad, typically a totalitarian or environmentally degraded one.

He knew the dictionary definition by heart, his college sweetheart had read quite a bit about the growing Dysto movement. Now it covered the globe and was involved in numberless acts of terrorism. It reminded people of the ill-fated ‘Jihadi,’ movement and its brutality.

“I just don’t get it Juliette, people are happy and have never been happier.” He’d told her.

“As long as they don’t ask too many questions Brad.”

Juliette had been the first and last person to call him Brad, since he’d been a kid; he discouraged it after he graduated. It seemed a bit lightweight as a name.

“But we’re encouraged to be curious. I myself have asked the lecturers many political questions.” She looked at him with a kind of pity.

“How many answers have you received Brad ? Proper answers that covered both sides of the argument.”

“Well..... in the end I realised that my own views did coincide with the views of our government.”

“And that doesn’t worry you Brad, or at least make you curious ?”

He’d lost touch with Juliette after college and he was slightly afraid to look for her. Part of him had thought her capable of joining one of the Dysto groups and that was something he’d rather not know. He met her again by chance, she was attending a music concert with her husband and daughter. She still had that look of sadness and sympathy in her eyes, when she looked at him.

“Fucking Dysto.” He said.

Maria nodded at him, they both knew the stats. President Herbert commissioned a monthly happiness poll and eighty five percent of the public were happy, with a record ninety four percent being content. Damn subversives, they’d find any excuse to cause damage and spread their lies.

“Repeat orders please.” He said.

The computer ran through a summary. They were to take at least one prisoner for interrogation, the other members of the group could be eradicated. Or as Bradford called it;

“Another pest control mission Maria.”

She smiled and removed a high powered energy weapon from her personal rack. No safe bullets for them, nothing that might refuse to hit a non-combatant. PD489 still used the best and most effective energy weapons that had ever existed on Earth. Bradford preferred an Ion blaster, he found it quicker to aim and use than the assault weapon that Maria carried. They fitted a layer of carbon fibre and Kevlar mix under their uniforms, and they were ready to leave. To the general public they looked like ordinary cops, PD489 didn't exist to the general public.

~ ~

Bradford walked into the garage office, his eyes scanning the hooks where the vehicle key cards were kept.

"Oh hell, we've been allocated an electric." He said

"I don't mind. The latest ones we had in are quite fast."

He glared at her; he really hated being given an electric vehicle to use. Part of him knew it was illogical, but he hated anything that needed a compressor to make pretend engine sounds.

"Fine, you can drive." He snapped.

As he reached for the card, someone half wearing a police uniform and dropping his weapon, fell out of the lift, shouting his name.

"Bradford ! Wait, I want to come."

The new arrival picked his gun up and shoved his shirt into his trousers, obviously trying to regain a bit of composure.

"Is that Gupta ?" Asked Maria.

"Looks like it. Obviously he didn't die the last time we took him out."

Gupta was walking with a slight limp, but he had his uniform straight and looked like any other 1st year trainee, by the time he reached them.

"You guys always get in so early." He said.

"And now we're leaving." Said Maria.

Bradford liked Gupta, he was keen and eager to learn, just a pity that he was so accident prone.

"They've put me on desk duty." Said Gupta. "Please take me with you, I'm going crazy."

"You're still limping Gupta." Said Bradford. "Go out with someone a bit safer."

"But I learn when I'm with you guys, you're.....Awesome !"

Maria winked at Bradford.

"I do believe he's trying to sweet talk us with a little flattery." She said.

"And it's working, I suppose we could take him along, he could carry our stuff. What do you think Maria ?"

She was eyeing Gupta up and down as though she was assessing his ability as a pack horse.

"Fine," she said, "but I don't want another interview with personnel. If he gets shot again, we may have to dump him out in the desert."

None of it worried Gupta, he was grinning at her, like a kid who's just had his big sister tell him that they were going to the movies.

"Let's see what car we've been allocated." Said Maria.

"No." Said Bradford. "Gupta can get our key card. He's just a trainee, no one can blame him for fucking up and getting the wrong one. Isn't that right Gupta ?"

Gupta was still looking at them both with adoring eyes, Bradford almost felt sorry for using him, almost.

"What do you want me to do ?" Asked Gupta.

"Get us something nice." Said Maria.

“Something powerful,” added Bradford, “something that any electric car enthusiast would hate.”

Gupta went into the office and returned with a key card, which he handed to Bradford.

“It’s got a yellow tag on it. For Captains and above use only.” Said Maria.

Gupta reached for the card, but Bradford pulled it out of his reach.

“No, this will do just fine.”

They found the car in the front row of the vehicles reserved for the top level staff. It was beautiful and Bradford instantly fell in love with it. There were still people who could afford luxury and the car was worth more than Bradford was likely to earn in a lifetime. Not Maria of course, she was A1 tiered and likely to make commissioner one day. Bradford was about to unlock the car, but Maria grabbed the card out of his hand.

“You said I was driving today.”

“Ok, but I get to drive back.”

Gupta sat in the back, leaning back into the real leather seat. Maria started the hydrogen cell engine and put the car into drive. It purred out of the garage and onto the street.

“Oh Gupta,” said Maria, “you are going to be in so much trouble, if I get a dent in this.”

~ ~

It took them just over an hour to get to the old bunkers and the heat was already oppressive. The only things that thrived in the desert were snakes and Bradford often wondered what they found to eat. Actually, something else did thrive in the dust and heat, subversives !

“Is this it ?” Asked Gupta.

Three ruined buildings were all there was on the surface and they looked very unimpressive.

“It’s all underground,” said Maria, “goes for half a mile under the desert in places.”

“The southern side caved in a few years back,” added Bradford, “but there’s still a lot of space down there. Enough to house an army of these Dysto subs.”

“We should have brought helmets with lights.” Said Gupta.

“Yeah, if you want to get shot.” Said Maria. “We’ve been down there before and they have lights strung up in most places.”

Bradford opened the trunk of the car they’d borrowed and rummaged about, digging through layers of brand new and expensive equipment.

“The Execs do better than us,” he said, “there’s even a first aid kit.”

Maria helped him dig, removing a powerful hand light and giving it to Gupta to carry.

“Just in case, but only for emergencies. They home in on anyone carrying a light.” She said.

Bradford found a back pack and put the lamp in it, before handing the pack to Gupta. He loaded Gupta up with flares and a few grenades, though he had no idea why anyone of Captain’s rank or above would ever need grenades. Maria was digging a small box from the back of the trunk, pulling it free of a heavier box that was trapping it.

“And this, we have to take this.” She said.

She was holding a personal video archive device, in effect, an HD camera that learned from its operator. They were expensive, very expensive.

“This is just a find and eradicate mission.” Said Bradford.

“You know me, always keen to pick up a bit of useful intelligence, if there’s time.”

“Ok, just stick it in Gupta’s bag.”

Gupta was puffing a bit in the heat as they crossed the road, but he still looked happy. They entered the largest of the buildings and in front of them was a long ramp, leading down to a huge steel door.

The door had seen better days and would never close again. It hung on just one hinge and its opening mechanism was corroded together.

“One day it’ll all collapse down into the sands.” Said Maria. “But hopefully not today.”

They all knew the story of the bunkers, it was in the history curriculum that everyone was taught. A hundred and sixty years before it looked like the whole globe might be drawn into nuclear conflict and a lot of bunkers had been built. Very few had been used and war had stopped in Asia, but a billion people had died then or later, from the creeping sickness of radiation exposure. Now the bunkers were just ruins, left to the snakes, the homeless and the subs.

“Is it safe ?” Asked Gupta.

“If it was, they wouldn’t send us.” Answered Maria.

Bradford led, walking past the steel door and into the corridor, which sloped gently into the distance.

“A politician once wanted to slap a preservation order on this place.” He said.

“Until the media made him look a fool.” Added Maria.

There were footprints in the dust and sand, lots of them and someone had strung up a line of bulbs that lit up most of the corridor. There were no side entrances and no cover, just a good seventy yards of corridor.

“Keep behind us Gupta.” Said Bradford.

He went in front, Maria slightly behind and to his left. It was her turn to have first kill, so he’d allow her to shoot first, if time allowed. Gupta walked behind them, struggling a bit, but he still held his gun up, ready to fight. They seemed to be making enough noise to waken the dead, but the first sub they met seemed unaware of them. Still thirty or forty feet from the where the corridor turned, a man walked into view. Perhaps a sentry ? He took up position, facing in their direction, but fiddling with a weapon of some kind and unaware of them. No warning was given or expected, Maria fired her plasma rifle and the man died. Bradford just had time to register his tattered clothing, before a hole suddenly appeared in the centre of the subs chest. He had to be a sub, no law abiding civilian ever carried a weapon. Bradford had only a fraction of a second to register the hole in the man’s chest, before the sub blew apart. It was a known problem with plasma weapons, very effective, but they could explode other ordnance and the sub probably had a grenade in a top pocket.

“Down !” Shouted Bradford.

He stared at the floor, his left hand over his eyes. The dust and debris storm quickly subsided and Bradford looked up to see a body mangled and torn beyond recognition. Maria was fine and ready to continue, but Gupta was coughing up dust.

“I think we just lost the element of surprise.” Said Bradford.

The lights in the corridor were flickering, but hadn’t gone out. Bradford had once traced the electricity feed to a lighting junction box on the expressway, a good mile away. The subs were resourceful; you had to give them that. His superiors had decided not to cut the power; the media were likely to complain about the homeless being left in the dark. Not that there’d be any homeless, the subs always drove them out to find new shelter.

Maria was first to turn into the next corridor, it too descended gently downwards. They advanced slowly and carefully, until they reached a point with entrances on the left and right. There wasn’t much humidity in the desert air, but there was enough to have corroded the metal doors. A century and a half of early morning moisture had done its work, little of the original doors remained.

“I’ll go left.” Whispered Maria.

Someone had used cardboard to form makeshift doors. Bradford kicked them out of the way and ran into the room on the right. He heard Maria fire her plasma rifle and cursed under his breath. It sounded as though she was getting the most action. He heard a gasp on his right and turned to see a woman reaching for a rifle. Bradford liked his Ion weapon; it put a neat hole through her face and into her brain, without being flashy about it. Very little blood, no viscera sprayed around the room. It was a tidy weapon for a tidy person. Bradford automatically dodged after firing; it never pays to remain static in a fire fight. Gupta was just entering the room; Bradford had guessed the trainee would follow him. Gupta dropped to the floor and began firing at the two men that side of the room. They had support pillars for cover and Gupta wasn't in danger of actually hitting them, but he was sending a lot of plasma shots in their general direction. Normally Bradford would have enjoyed dislodging the subs, but they had a lot more of the bunker to clear.

"Gupta, a grenade !" He called out.

Gupta managed to keep firing and pull a grenade from his pack, Bradford was impressed. The trainee tossed the grenade over to him, which wasn't what Bradford had meant. Bradford sighed, activated the grenade and threw it midway between the two subs. He was rewarded by seeing both of them reduced to messy piles of flesh and bone, as the grenade exploded.

"Didn't we want one for interrogation ?" Asked Gupta.

"There will be others Gupta, with subs there are always more to kill. Come on, we should go and see how many Maria had in her room."

Gupta wasn't moving, he was looking at the bodies they were about to leave behind.

"Don't we bag them up, or at least go through their things ?"

"This is just a search and eradicate mission."

Bradford had reached the corridor, but still Gupta hung back.

"But surely we should look for ID of some kind ?"

"Shit, why am I surrounded by curious fools ? I put up with it from Maria, she'll probably be my boss one day. But I'm not taking this crap from a trainee, right ?!"

Gupta looked as though he'd been shot and Bradford didn't want a sulky trainee around him for the rest of the day. He actually patted him on the shoulder.

"You did well Gupta, made them stay under cover."

"You really think so ?"

Bradford grinned at him and was rewarded by a smile.

"Would I lie to you Gupta ? But you'll have it drummed into you right through training. You follow orders exactly and never do less or more than you're told to. Come back in a month and you'll find no bodies. Either their own people bury them or the hungry desert creatures get a free meal. Either way, it isn't our concern. I'm just telling you this for your own good, ok ?"

"Yeah, sorry Bradford."

"Have you actually killed a bad guy yet Gupta ?"

"No, but I wounded one."

"Then today well have to find you a subversive to kill, a big one."

Gupta was smiling as he went to see how many subs Maria had taken care of. It had to be at least five, she always seemed to have luck on her side. Bradford felt his personal phone vibrating against the skin of his chest. He only knew of one person likely to be leaving him messages. He put his hand under the Kevlar and found his phone. One video message, from his own home phone, it had to be Amoe. Most women would have waited until they'd applied their makeup, but he liked the way she looked, tousled from being in bed.

'Was it something I said ? Seriously Bradford, no problem.

I know how much your job means to you.

Friday sounds good, but I'm not getting on that bike again.

I'll get a cab and pick you up around 8.'

She'd left the connection on for a few seconds, just grinning at him and then finally disconnecting.

~ ~

Two hours later and Gupta still hadn't actually killed anyone, though they had found another dozen subversives to eradicate. They still didn't have a live sub to take back for interrogation either, something they hoped to put right in the room, seventy yards ahead of them.

"This place is huge." Said Gupta.

"They spread it out, in case part of it was damaged." Said Maria.

Bradford pointed to a strip of rusting metal on the wall of the corridor.

"There are blast doors along every corridor," he said, "but none of them have closed in over a century."

Someone had put a corrugated iron door up over the old rusted remains of the original doors. They looked fairly strong and indicated that the subs had something of value in the room beyond.

Bradford swapped to the other side of the corridor as they approached to within twenty feet of the corrugated iron barrier.

"I go left this time." He hissed at Maria.

"And we need a live one. Someone small this time if possible." Said Maria.

"Huh ?"

"The last one, the one you picked, was a good six foot six and two hundred and fifty pounds. I broke two nails getting him out of the trunk. We need a small one this time, one we can bind up and stick in the back with Gupta."

Bradford could usually tell if Maria was joking, but now he had no idea.

"Ok." He said. "I go left, Maria goes right and Gupta gets behind some cover and tries his best to actually kill a sub today."

Bradford crashed through the iron door and into the room beyond. It had been intended as a sort of common room and refectory for the bunker and was the biggest room in the place. Bradford didn't care where he was once the fighting started. He was fast, strong and much more agile than his opponents and he loved it. He heard bullets hitting the wall near him and didn't care. One sub he shot right in the centre of his chest, enjoying the puzzled look on the man's face, as he crumpled to the ground. Another he shot in the eyes, it was almost a game. He quickly had only dead enemies in front of him and turned; in time to see Maria ramming her plasma rifle into the face of a female sub. Gupta was behind an overturned table, but he didn't seem to have had the time or the opportunity to fire his weapon.

"We got our live one." Said Maria.

The woman was unconscious as Maria used plastic ties to bind her wrists and ankles. She then picked her up and put her on a chair in the centre of the room. Bradford examined the captive, a girl of about nineteen, no more than five feet tall and skinny.

"I guess she'll have to do," he said, "but she's a bit small."

"She's fine, the guys in interrogation don't measure them before filling them full of drugs."

Is that what they did ? Bradford had always assumed that interrogation still involved the pulling out of finger nails and the application of electrodes to sensitive places. He left Maria to bind the girl to

the chair and headed towards an old fridge that he'd noticed. He opened the door and was rewarded by a wave of cool air. It was working, good, even subs sometimes had decent food to eat. "These guys ate well," he said, "there's even some apple pie."

There were several plastic gallon containers of water at the bottom of the fridge. He removed one and the pie and brought them over to one of the tables. He opened the water and sniffed it before taking a sip. It was clean and fresh, so he took a huge mouthful.

"That can't be safe, not their water." Said Gupta.

"Yeah, right, they're going to poison their water. Just in case I come by and raid their fridge today." Bradford pulled up the crust on an edge of the pie and the smell of freshly baked apples hit his senses. He broke off a huge piece and ate it.

"You should try some." Said Bradford.

"No way."

"Seriously Gupta, after two hours in this heat, you need some fluids."

Bradford drank a good pint from the container, before handing it to Gupta. At first the trainee just took sips, but then he took a long drink of the cool liquid. Bradford looked around and joined Maria, who was examining the walls.

"Have you seen the graffiti?" She asked.

Every wall was covered in a mixture of crude pictures and detailed text, as if several people had tried to decorate the walls with their thoughts and ideas.

"Must have taken a while, they must have lived here for some time." Said Bradford.

"It's in at least five different languages and I struggle with English and Spanish." Said Maria. "I'm going to use the camera to record it all Bradford, it might be important."

He didn't bother trying to have the 'follow orders,' conversation with her. He'd tried that many times in the past and had never won. He watched as she attached a collar to her neck and clipped the camera to it. It looked like a medieval torture device, but it was actually quite comfortable to wear. The HD camera would follow her eye line, recording everything she saw.

"Fine, I'll clear out the final corridor and then we're finished here." He said.

"No hurry, they've actually got an old computer. I'll try to get the memory cube out of it while I'm here."

He just sighed and finished the pie, before heading for the door on the far side of the room.

"There's water in the fridge." He called back over his shoulder.

Gupta was there, sprinted across the room and was by his side as he got to yet another corrugated iron door.

"Can I come with you?"

"No. Maria will be working on their computer, she'll need someone watching her back. Stay alert and look after her."

"Ok."

Bradford kicked the door aside with ease and he was in the last corridor to be cleared, just three or four small store rooms and they'd completed the mission orders. Left or right, he chose left and walked to the first room. Nothing, just an empty room with corroded metal shelving and a musty smell. The room the other side of the corridor was the same, but there were footprints leading to the room at the end of the corridor. Recent footprints, where someone had squashed a bug and the resulting mess was still wet and gooey. Bradford ran into the room swinging his gun around, eager to find a target. There was nothing, but the musty smell, the smell of a recent unwashed body being in

the room, perhaps several. Then he heard the sound of gunfire, old fashioned cordite and lead bullet gunfire. Bradford ran across the room and back down the corridor.

"I got him, I got the bastard !"

Gupta was on the ground, his hand over a facial wound that was bleeding quite badly. Quite near him was the body of a man, a tall muscular man with an old revolver still in his hand. It was a museum piece, but obviously still capable of being lethal. The first thing Bradford did was shoot the sub in the head, just in case Gupta hadn't quite hit the right spot.

"Keep still I need to look at your wound."

He had to push Gupta's hand out of the way. The wound was a bleeder, wounds to the face usually are. The bullet had ripped his cheek right down to the bone, but he'd live.

"Barely a scratch, stop making such a fuss."

"It hurts so much Bradford."

"Being shot usually does. I'll check the last room and help you back to Maria, she's a wiz with a first aid kit."

He pulled Gupta up against the wall to get him upright and was pleased to see that the trainee was grinning back at him.

"I got one, a big one."

"You did and a nice scar to impress the girls. No better panty remover than a really hard looking scar."

His communicator buzzed, it could only be Maria. He pressed the talk button.

"Are you alright ?" He asked.

"Fine, just finishing up, I got the memory cube out in one piece. It's Gupta, he took off after you."

"Yes, he's here. He got himself shot again."

"Is it bad ?"

"No, we won't have to dump his body down a hole. He got his first kill as well, a big one, must be a good two hundred and twenty pounds."

"Yay, good for Gupta. I'll call you when I'm ready to leave. Will you need help getting Gupta back."

"No, he can still walk."

Bradford left Gupta and walked towards the last door and noticed that it was just made of cloth. A curtain as a door, he'd never seen the subversives do that before. Through the curtain and he was in an almost domestic situation. Plates on a table, food half eaten. Small plates and a child's doll, all looking recently used and dropped in a hurry. The room went on and turned a corner. As Bradford ducked and turned a burst of fire went over his head. He shot the man twice, once in the heart and once in the head, then watched as he fell to the ground.

"Please." She said.

A woman, his woman ? Standing beside his body, two children by her side. Children, the subversives had never brought children into their war before. A girl aged about eight or nine and hanging onto her arm, a boy of five or six. Their mother remained calm, her eyes looking straight into his.

"Please." She said again.

The boy was crying but holding it back, it sounded almost as though he was choking. Bradford had his gun aimed at the mother's head, as his comms unit buzzed. He pressed the button.

"Yes ?"

"I'm finished here. Bring Gupta back and we can get him patched up and leave."

"Fine. I'm just finishing up here and I'll be with you."

~

~

© Ed Cowling – November 2015