

## Bradford

### Chapter 11 – Deadly Cargo

**“Maria looked spellbound, as the large craft lowered itself onto the roof and a side door opened.”**

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Bradford tried to ignore the timer counting down and the sound of Maria breathing. Most of the people visiting Cherish vaults were going to be professional couriers, visiting dozens of such places every month. The entry codes had to be complex enough to ensure the integrity of the security system, but easy enough to stop too many couriers being obliterated. It just couldn't be that awkward to get the passcode tapped in, it couldn't. He'd already pressed the 2, so he quickly entered the next three numbers.

4 then 0, making sure it was a 0 and not a letter o, then 8.

“Bradford !” Whispered Maria.

“I know, I know, leave me to get on with it.”

Gillian had drawn something that looked like a toad or a frog, but her artistic skills left a lot to be desired. It looked like it had been drawn with a biro, on a phone screen and in a hurry. Bradford pressed the character that looked like a toad and there were no alarm bells going off. Would there be though ? He noticed the counter reach thirty five seconds. Easy now, four numbers in a row.

1 then 7 then 1 and then yet another 1.

The final character Gillian had drawn looked like a bird perched somewhere. The problem was that the keypad had two bird like characters, one hefty looking, another far less hefty looking. If only Gillian had been more of an artist.

“Bradford, look at the timer.”

“Shush, I have two hefty birds.”

It didn't quieten her, he could hear Maria's rapid breathing. He looked at the timer and wondered what all the fuss was about. Eight seconds was plenty of time. He looked at Gillian's drawing and decided that she was going for very hefty and hadn't made a good job of it. As the timer hit two seconds, he pressed the hefty bird character and the vault door opened.

“Having difficulty remembering your passcode.” Said the robotic female voice. “Ask our staff to change it to something more memorable.”

“Jeez Bradford.”

“Sorry. Check to see if any guards are heading our way.”

The inside of the vault was less impressive or as large as he'd expected. A brick built chamber, not much bigger than the average hotel bathroom. There were shelves with power points and a few lights that could be moved and aimed where light was needed. It all looked a bit basic, but it wasn't really intended as a work area. Five small metal cases and something he recognised, a cryogenic carry case, plugged into one of the power sockets.

“Nothing, can't even see them moving about.” Said Maria. “I'll check again in a couple of minutes.” Bradford examined the metals cases and each had a cardboard label around the handle. It was old tech, but it worked. The date of arrival in the vault was written on the label and the previous date crossed through.

“There's about three months of archiving here and this is the newest.” Said Bradford.

The case wasn't even locked, just a wax seal of some kind, over two edges. There might be booby-traps, but Gillian's message hadn't mentioned any.

"Might be a good idea to step back a bit." He said.

He rubbed away most of the wax seal and opened the catches, revealing a case full of memory cubes and a hand written itinerary, in Gillian McBride's writing. Some of the items on the list seemed to be exactly what they were looking for.

'#43 Mike Lakey's emails for the last two months.'

'#87 Results of controlled exposure of two groups in San Pablo Lab.'

The list went on and on, all of it invaluable information, but the real prize was the cryogenic carry case.

"How do you think they got it here?" Asked Maria.

"Professional couriers, probably on a scheduled flight."

They both knew that baggage checks were minimal at most airports and could be completely avoided, for the right price.

"To think that was on a plane, with over a hundred people." She said.

"And we'll be taking it back the same way." He said.

"Is it safe?" She asked.

He looked it over, the batteries were fully charged while it was on external power and the small screen showed they were at 100%. Battery life? He could only guess, but it had to be more than enough for a courier to pick it up and transport to the Cherish Vault. The temperature gauge said -200, which was encouraging; it was colder than the case Michael M Reece had been carrying and well below the -196 critical temperature.

"I'm no expert." Said Bradford. "But everything seems to indicate a cryo case in perfect condition."

There was a case for the entire cryo case to fit inside. It would cover the screen, but was obviously intended for concealment during transport. He put the case into the outer cover, removing it from the wall socket as he did so. Maria was checking the guards.

"Guard on the way here." She said. "They must have been alerted to the door opening."

"How many?" He asked.

"Just one guard and he's shuffling about and looking fed up."

"They probably think it's a system error." He said, "Still, I think Cherish have been living on their reputation. These guards are crap."

"You grab, I'll tape." Said Maria.

She pulled loose about eight inches of duct tape and they both waited for the guard to arrive. This one wasn't crap, his reactions were fast, very fast. Ex-jock maybe, a professional sportsman before joining Cherish, he moved quickly and had Maria up against the wall, his hand round her throat. Bradford didn't try anything fancy, Maria would be dead within seconds. He used his knife, the wicked looking blade they'd bought on the way. He jammed it between the guard's ribs, twisting it, once it had entered his heart. The man fell to the ground, leaving Maria gasping.

"Are you going to be ok?" He asked.

Maria merely nodded, while he relieved the dead guard of two blasters and a combat knife. Two decent energy weapons each and all of them good quality. He began to feel almost optimistic, about getting back to the hotel in one piece.

"We need to move." He said. "More will come when he doesn't call in, lots more."

Maria still couldn't speak, but she picked up the metal case, while Bradford lifted the case with the pathogen inside. Together they checked outside and moved carefully towards the wall with the gap in the razor wire. Speed now mattered more than caution and they quickly climbed the wall and jumped down on the far side. Maria went down first and Bradford dropped the cases down to her.

They ran, hearing an alarm going off and knowing they'd caused it. They carried on running until the darkness of the city streets hid them from prying eyes.

"Are you ok Maria ?" He asked. "Can you talk."

"I'll be fine." She croaked. "He was stronger than he looked."

Dawn was colouring the sky and it was likely to be full light by the time they reached their hotel.

"I'm sure the lady in the bunny costume will know a doctor." He said. "Who doesn't mind treating minor trauma cases, no questions asked."

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Gupta quite enjoyed the flight in the military shuttle. PD489 didn't own anything big enough to fly in a full team, but the military VTOL craft had seating for fifty, sixty crammed in really tight. The PD489 team numbered a mere fifteen and they travelled in comfort. A little vibration and engine noise from the powerful hydrogen cell motors, but the craft ran pretty smooth, for a military shuttle. Even Schneider and Yasmine had stopped bitching at each other and were enjoying the journey.

"It just needs an in-flight movie and a buffet." Yasmine had commented.

Yasmine DuClare, the woman now sharing her bed with him. Gupta knew he was screwing well above his own league, but the sex was sensational. It was like dating a force of nature, a human hurricane. He was fairly sure she'd dump him eventually, but while it lasted, he was having the time of his life.

"Dark down there." He commented.

"Stupid place for a hotel." Said Schneider. "Rocky beach, bad weather most of the year and no decent sized town for miles."

There was no moon, but the only lights below were spread out over miles. The occasional farmhouse with a porch light, a few road signs on the main highway. Otherwise it was completely dark. Twenty million people crammed tight into San Pablo, yet out on the edges of the islands, there was all this unspoiled land. It was as if Yasmine had read his mind.

"No work, no housing, no stores." She said. "Picturesque countryside to one person, is deadly isolated desolation to another."

Two flashing green lights on the forward bulkhead, told them they were about five minutes from landing. They were going to land at the end of the hotel's driveway and Gupta thought that was a mistake.

"Never, ever underestimate your enemy." Bradford had told him, over and over.

Bradford would have landed a good three or four miles away and walked the rest, but Bradford wasn't there. Gupta had tried to put his objections to Schneider, but no one wanted to listen. Schneider was the leader and everyone believed that Schneider was invulnerable. A head came out of the door where the pilots sat.

"Bit windy, twenty knots." Said the co-pilot. "I hope none of you get travel sick, we land in two minutes."

"You heard the man !" Shouted Schneider. "Pick up your stuff and get ready."

The lighting dimmed to prepare their eyes for outside and the craft slowed down. Gupta hadn't been on many VTOL craft and the feeling of braking still surprised him. Aircraft just didn't brake and come to a halt, it felt wrong and quite alarming. Then the craft began to descend and the buffeting began.

"Hold on to something and don't puke." Said Schneider.

Forward speed gave the craft stability and now they were on just the vertical turbines and being bounced about in a twenty knot gale. Gupta held onto whatever he could and waited for the doors to open. Two solid green lights and the doors opened. It wasn't landing under fire, so they took their

time, trying to keep their feet against the wind. One of their team cracked an arm against the side of the door and broke her wrist. Not a good omen. Schneider was good under fire, but not a born leader. He began to walk towards the hotel, until someone told him there had been an accident during the landing. It all began to become a bit of a shambles and Gupta decided to stay close to Yasmine.

“Ok, get her wrist bandaged up and she can follow at the rear.” Said Schneider.

A few were still puking, yet Schneider wasn’t giving them even a minute to check their kit and get their bearings. Sadly Yasmine was one of the those being sick and no one was holding Schneider in check.

“Right !” Shouted Schneider. “Weapons at the ready ! We’re going to be moving at a fast trot and entering the main doors.”

High above them something exploded and Gupta heard a crackle in his earpiece. He knew what it was, Bradford had told him that Samuel often used the same trick.

“He’s destroying our drones.” He said to Schneider. “Cutting off our eyes and ears.”

It was no use; Schneider had the red mist in front of his eyes and looked straight through Gupta. Another drone exploded above them, destroyed by a missile and Schneider completely misread the situation.

“He’s running away.” He shouted. “Quick, on the double !”

They obeyed, all of them running furiously after Schneider, but not Gupta. He held onto Yasmine, forcing her to stop and listen to him.

“It’s not a rout, he’s not running.” He said. “Samuel is luring us into a trap.”

“But it’s our duty to obey Schneider, he’s the leader.”

Yasmine was a fanatic in her own way, just one who worked for the status quo, rather than trying to overthrow it.

“You’re brighter than me.” Said Gupta. “But I’ve been out with Bradford more often. Trust me, he’d be finding a back way in.”

She was calm now, almost docile.

“There are side and rear doors on the plans.” She said.

“Come on.” Said Gupta. “We’ll walk instead of run and find that side door.”

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The rain woke Camila, bashing against her bedroom window. Once awake she needed to pee and then of course, check on the children. Mateo was still in the same room as his sister, but she saw no harm in it. He was still very young and they were used to sleeping close to each other. Mateo was curled into a ball under the bed covers and didn’t move, as she stroked his head. Sofia was just a shape in her own bed, difficult to make out in the dark. Camila bumped her foot on a bed leg and let out a low curse.

“Sorry, go back to sleep.”

She gently rubbed Mateo’s face and he drifted off to sleep. Her daughter hadn’t reacted though, hadn’t even moved. Camila carefully pulled down the sheets on her daughter’s bed and found a rolled up blanket and a bunched up towel as a head. She was with that boy, Camila knew it. It was natural, but her daughter was so young. Too young to be spending her nights making out with a boy she hardly knew. She put on the bedroom light and woke up her son, waiting until he was fully alert.

“Where is your sister ?”

He looked cautious and then burst into tears.

“Hey, no one is in serious trouble. Where is she ?”

He made impressions of kissing and cuddling and started giggling.

“Sofia is kissing..... Urgghh.” He said.

Camila had to laugh with him, his impression of his sister snogging was hilarious.

“Where are they ?” She asked. “Where do they kiss.”

He pointed out of the window.

“Under the ramp.”

Damn, that was outside the gates and fences that kept their building relatively safe. Her daughter could probably handle herself out there better than most, but it was night and her daughter was still so young.

“Good boy.” She said. “I have to go out and find her. Stay in bed, I won’t be long.”

She didn’t have to worry, he was asleep before she’d straightened his covers. First she went to the closet in her room, where her blaster was on the top shelf, plugged into a charger. It wasn’t the latest model, but it was accurate and reliable. Then just enough clothing to be respectable and a plastic coverall to keep out the rain. The long thin barrel of her blaster felt good against her hip, as though it belonged there. Camila locked the front door of her apartment and walked towards the gate nearest to the expressway exit ramp. There were lights here and there, some illuminating traffic signs and others put up by the owners of the building. It wasn’t good lighting, but it enabled her to find her way.

The rain was appalling, it soaked her trainers and turned everything to mud. The only good thing was that it muffled sound and the young lovers were unlikely to hear her coming. She opened the gate and understood why her daughter had picked the ramp as the place for her trysts. Get up into the concrete supports and you’d not only be dry, you’d also be just about impossible to see from below. Camila had never beaten her daughter, but as she squelched through the mud, she thought it might be a good time to start.

“I never even kissed a boy until I was fifteen.” She muttered.

Esteban was the boy’s name, though she’d only found that out from asking Lou, the building manager. Her daughter was out in the middle of the night, with a boy she’d never even properly introduced to her mother. Camila was so angry, that she almost walked into the scene of her daughter’s abduction. First she noticed her daughter leaning against a concrete pillar and felt relief. Sofia was at least fully dressed, as was Esteban. Then she noticed that their hands were bound and something had been tied over their mouths.

“No you can’t fuck her. The boss wants her undamaged.”

Camila could move silently when she had to. She moved out of the rain and under the edge of the ramp, trying to see and hear the men, without being seen herself. There were two of them, both armed with wicked looking machetes. There might be more than two, so she kept her left side against the ramp and slowly edged towards them.

“If you really can’t control yourself, fuck the boy. The boss doesn’t give a crap about him.”

She was angry and the two men seemed so caught up in their argument, that neither of them had noticed the movements in the shadows. She carefully drew her blaster and aimed it at one of the men. It might have been the one who wanted to rape her daughter, it might not have been. She chose the one looking her way and aimed it between his eyes, before squeezing the trigger. Some blasters boil the contents of a head, burst it from within, causing a great deal of shock and awe. Hers didn’t, which could often be an advantage. The man fell to the ground, a neat round hole in the centre of his face. His friend hadn’t seen her or heard her blaster. He spun, actually looking in the wrong direction, turning his back to her. Camila took two paces towards him and he must have

heard her. He spun and saw her, raising his machete to strike at her. A steaming hole appeared in his right cheek and then another in the centre of his nose. He never even had a chance to cry out, before falling on his back.

"Are there more of them?" Camila asked.

Sofia shook her head vigorously, as did Esteban. It was dark where they were lying. It took Camila a moment to realise they'd been tied up with flex, which had cut into their arms.

"Bastards." Muttered Camila. "I'd like to kill them again."

She twisted and pulled at the flex, until the kids were both free and then pulled off the duct tape from their mouths.

"Listen both of you." She hissed. "This is important."

"Yes Momma."

"These animals deserved to die." Said Camila. "But the cops might not see it that way."

She glared at them a little, hoping they'd get the idea.

"So we never talk of this again, or mention it to anyone." She added.

"No, of course not." Said Sofia.

Esteban was nodding at her, but she was still angry at him. It was all his fault, if he hadn't brought her daughter to such a place..... Camilla grabbed him and shoved her blaster under his chin.

"You brought Sofia here, so that you could paw at her and worse." She hissed.

"No Momma." Said Sofia. "We just kissed and cuddled, nothing else.....I swear."

"Then why come here?"

"I have Mateo to look after all day." Said Sofia. "There are always prying eyes in the building."

Camila understood, her daughter was used to the freedom of living like a feral creature. She'd have to learn though, a better life meant a few rules.

"No more!" She said. "If you want to see my daughter, you come to dinner one night. Tell me about yourself and your family and if I like you, you can still see Sofia. Understood?"

"Yes." Said Esteban.

It was a muffled yes, she still had the blaster jammed under his chin.

"If you hurt my daughter....."

Her eyes moved towards the dead bodies and she could see the fear in his eyes. Esteban had definitely got the message.

"Did they take anything of yours?"

"No Momma."

"Did you lose anything? Check your pockets, it's important."

They both confirmed that they still had everything they'd left the building with. Camila picked up the flex and duct tape, just in case the cops bothered to look for evidence. She scuffed the area where they'd been lying and was pleased that it looked like any other part of the dirt under the ramp.

"No more meeting outside of the fence at night!"

"No Momma."

"I give you my word." Said Esteban.

She was warming slightly to Esteban.

"Tell your parents you were in a fight." She said. "And come to dinner tomorrow night."

Camila leading, they walked back towards the building. The rain had eased and the young lovers were only slightly drenched, by the time they were back inside the fence. It was Samuel of course, the boss who wanted Sofia abducted. Camila decided to tell Bradford everything she knew, the time of old loyalties was over.

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Bradford leant back and took another sip of the excellent and perfectly chilled, Pacific Sparkling wine. A few mentions of Kealani Lee and they'd had no trouble in getting onto the first flight out of New Borongan. No one was interested in anything they were carrying and he almost regretted leaving their weapons in a dumpster. Blasters were a big issue on aircraft though and they hadn't wanted to spend twenty years in a New Borongan jail.

"How is your throat?" He asked.

Maria had to put down her glass to answer, he assumed she was healing.

"Better, that doctor knew his stuff." She answered.

The doctor had just rolled his eyes, as they blamed her throat on over enthusiastic erotic asphyxiation. There had been two injections into her neck and some cream to rub in.

"See your own doctor as soon as possible."

He'd said before being paid a truly enormous sum of money. The injections had worked though, a scarf over the bruise and Maria looked as good as new. Her voice sounded as though she had the world's worst sore throat, but that was gradually improving.

"Never again." She croaked. "Next time, take Gupta."

Her smile told him she was joking, as she filled her glass.

The cryo case was between his legs, safely jammed against the seat support and clenched between his ankles. First class had its problems, all the crew seemed to want to talk to them and introduce themselves.

'Give Mr Lee my regards.' They all ended with.

There was a lull in the movement of gushing staff, so he pulled out the case and checked the screen. -200 and the battery hadn't moved off full charge, it was fine. It crossed his mind that other dangerous cargos might be carried on aircraft every day, probably were. Maria was looking at him. "Perfect." He said.

She smiled and settled back, closing her eyes for a nap. Four hours and they'd be back in San Pablo. He just hoped that Schneider hadn't gone crazy, or cocked up the mission, or both.

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They kept hearing explosions and blaster fire in the distance, or to their left, but nothing that was close to them. A large drone had been hit and crashed into the trees, causing a massive ball of flame. It was like watching a movie though, none of it seemed to be a threat. Gupta noticed movement on the path in front of them and grabbed Yasmine's hand. It wasn't by the book, but grabbing her hand gained her attention.

"Someone on the path." He whispered. "Probably a guard."

They became warriors again, in a heartbeat. Weapons ready, they moved forward and realised that their opponents weren't super subversives. The man in front of them wasn't alert and hadn't noticed them approach. He was fiddling with his communicator.

"Anyone there." He said. "Are we retreating?"

Gupta had learned a lot from Bradford and right at the top of the list was not giving warnings.

"Just kill them." Bradford had told him. "Don't feel a need to explain why or justify yourself."

Gupta fired at almost the same time as Yasmine and the subversive was dead before he hit the ground. His communicator was still working, so Gupta picked it up and listened to the crackle.

"Looks like their command structure has collapsed." Said Yasmine.

So had theirs, but Gupta thought it impolite to mention it. The ground trembled and part of the hotel roof was lit up, as a bright yellow flame blew the tiles apart and rose a hundred feet into the

air. They heard a brief amount of shouting and then everything was quiet again. Gupta crept along the path towards the hotel's side doors, Yasmine right behind him. He pushed the door and it opened.

"There's a glow in there." He said. "Something is burning."

Two dead subversives just inside the doors, Yasmine picked up a blaster that was better than hers. Gupta was beginning to realise that his lover had a thing about blasters. The glow was coming from the back of the hotel. She touched his hand this time, pointing out two subversives guarding a set of doors.

"Where are our guys?" She whispered.

Something huge had happened in the central lobby, the wooden staircase going up to the next floor was burning and there was a large hole in the ceiling. Another detonation caused part of the stairs to collapse and the sudden flare lit up the subversive guards. Gupta took his chance and fired, Yasmine taking her cue from him. Three shots, maybe four into each sub, there was no question of shooting to wound.

"Wait a second." Said Gupta.

No one running to see what had happened, no angry comrade come to gain vengeance. Once he was happy that it was safe, Gupta walked towards the doors at the rear of the lobby and into the hotel's main function room. There were two of their team lying dead near the door and another of the subversives. Once again, they'd arrived late for the battle, which didn't upset Gupta.

"Oh crap!" Shouted Yasmine. "No, not Schneider!"

She had her blaster up, constantly turning, looking for targets. Gupta couldn't see what she meant and then he saw Schneider, sprawled against the far wall. There was no obviously fatal wound, but someone had cut off his shirt and carved a message into his flesh.

'Next time come yourself – S'

Large letters, cut so deep, that the S character had nicked the ribs. Gupta didn't assume Schneider was dead, he leant down and checked his neck for a pulse. The flesh was warm and pliable, he hadn't been dead long, but there wasn't a trace of a heartbeat. Then Gupta saw the front of Schneider's head had been destroyed by a blaster shot.

"He always seemed so..... indestructible." Said Yasmine.

"I know."

More shouted conversation, this time from the back of the hotel.

"They're still here." Said Gupta. "We can still get the bastards."

He ran towards the glass doors, which led to the cliffs and a path down to a small jetty. The doors were open and he could hear Yasmine running behind him. It was the first time Gupta had experienced the rage, which most warriors refer to as 'the red mist.' Normal common sense seemed to leave him, to be replaced a rage, a need for vengeance.

"Be careful!" Shouted Yasmine. "Slow down."

He didn't. Gupta saw a subversive on the small path and fired twice. As he ran past the body, he could hear voices. There seemed to be an argument going on, but he couldn't make out the words. Another subversive in front of him and he's firing, but there are blaster shots coming back at him.

"Get down Gupta, there are too many."

No good, he's hit, though he can't tell exactly where. Gupta falls and tumbles. Over and over he tumbles, wondering when he'll stop falling.

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Bradford was stood in his own apartment, alone with Camila. There was little sign of the explosion of the device above his door, just a scorch mark embedded in the glass of his lounge window.

“Could have been worse.” He said. “I did wonder what I was coming home to.”

He’d arrived at San Pablo airport to find no less than four ‘urgent, we need to meet immediately,’ messages, one from President Herbert. He’d ignored them all and headed for home. Camila had told him about the attempted abduction of Sofia, through the bathroom door, as he’d showered.

“Are you sure about this boy Camilla ?” He’d asked. “He might be one of Samuel’s people.”

“No, he’s just a boy in love, I recognise the signs.”

“Still, find out about his family and I’ll have them checked out.”

There had been a few moments of silence.

“Did you check me out ?” She asked.

“Nahh, you’ve got an honest face.”

Thirty minutes later and he was giving a state of the art Ion Blaster to Camila and collecting his things together.

“You wouldn’t believe how busy I’m going to be.” He said. “Take this and shoot first.”

He grinned at her.

“Don’t worry, kill the wrong guy and I can lose them in the office paperwork.”

“You’re going to kill him aren’t you ?”

“He has killed a lot of my people Camila.”

She hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. She’d already told him a few secrets about Samuel and his various hideouts.

“Take care.” She said.

Bradford checked over the car park before getting into his car. He wasn’t paranoid by nature, but if they’d come after Camila’s daughter, he was going to be extra cautious. Instead of starting the car, he pressed the button to dial the president. The call was answered after a single ring.

“Bradford, I’ve been trying to contact you.”

“Sorry Sir, things have been a bit hectic, as I’m sure you realise.”

“Five dead, including Schneider.” Said Herbert. “They have families, it will take quite a lot of work to smooth this over.”

It looked bad, Bradford knew that. They hadn’t even managed to kill or capture Samuel. He had one very good piece of news though.

“I have the pathogen Sir.” He said. “I sent it to Maria, to be put in safe storage.”

“Dear God Bradford, tell her to be careful with it.”

“She’s the best Sir. I also recovered a case full of memory cubes. It’s Lakey Sir, Lakey pharmaceutical have turned rogue on us.”

A few moments of listening to the president breath, it was obviously his thinking time.

“How did you get the pathogen into San Pablo ?”

“On a scheduled flight Sir.”

“Dear God Bradford.....”

He sounded genuinely shocked. Bradford didn’t like to tell him about half of the things, he was certain arrived on scheduled flights.

“We’ll need to discuss a suitable response. Come to my office as soon as you can.” Said the president.

Here it came, he’d been dreading the conversation, but knew it had to happen.

“Actually I need to do something important Sir.” He said. “And I need to ask you for another favour.”

“Damn it Bradford, you’ve already created a mess. Five dead and you weren’t even there to lead your people. Why should I trust you now ?”

He didn’t mention recovering the pathogen, it might seem like arguing and presidents didn’t like people who argued. Everyone knew that.

“I know where Samuel is Sir.”

“You’re certain ?”

“Yes Sir and I will go alone. No more PD489 personnel will be put at risk.”

More of the breathing and Bradford heard the president muttering to someone else.

“I’ll trust you this time Bradford, you did recover a sample of that terrible disease.” Said the president. “Don’t let me down Bradford..... I won’t forgive a second bad outcome. Now what is this favour ?”

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Bradford had never intended to go back to the PD489 building, but he wanted to check on his bike. San Pablo was having an unseasonal rainy period, but he still felt better on two wheels. Quicker through traffic, faster away from lights, getting through all those small gaps. He loved it all and never felt more alive than when he was on his bike. Actually that wasn’t quite true, sex with Amoe brought the same kind of intense awareness of just..... Being alive.

“You can’t just go without giving me a few instructions.”

Damn, he’d forgotten that Roland watched the cameras in the garage.

“How is Gupta ?” Asked Bradford.

“He’ll live, but his right shoulder is unlikely to regain full mobility.”

Bradford took it in and realised he wasn’t being fair to any of his team. Gupta had gone into a poorly organised hell hole and now he wasn’t giving Roland the support he needed. Bradford remembered the red faced commanders in the police, the ones who died of heart attacks at fifty. Life wasn’t fair, you just had to make a choice of action and stick with it.

“The military have been asking about us helping with a joint attack on an island out in the middle of nowhere.” Roland continued. “They say you know all about it !”

He could almost see Roland’s eyes popping out his head from stress.

“All being well I’ll be back by tomorrow.” Said Bradford. “Everything can wait until then.”

Roland wasn’t so easily deflected.

“The president has called you at least three times.” He said. “And Maria has important information for you.”

“I’ll see Maria, get kitted up and then I’m heading up to the roof.”

“Why the roof ?” Asked Roland.

“Because that’s where I’m being picked up.”

Bradford almost ran to the elevator and he could still hear Roland’s fingers, bashing information into his tablet. He’d survive, PD489 would survive. Bradford just hoped he survived. He found Maria going through the memory cubes they’d found in the Cherish Vault.

“Did you hear about Gupta ?” She asked.

“Yeah, damn that guy. If there are no bullets to catch, he’ll find a blaster to get hit by.”

They were both chuckling, only Maria had his kind of weird sense of humour.

“Seriously.” She said. “That shoulder does make him unfit for active duty.”

“Nahh, I’m his boss. We’ll just need to teach him to duck quicker.”

Bradford looked at her PC screen, currently showing some of Mike Lakey’s more lurid emails.

“He really does intent to wipe out half of San Pablo.” She said. “The president wants to organise a raid on Lakey Island, with you leading the charge.”

“I spoke to the president and he’s holding off for two days.” Said Bradford. “Where did you put the pathogen ?”

“In the bio-hazard vault in the basement. Fiddling with that kind of lethality, is way beyond my pay grade.”

He held her hand and instantly realised it was a mistake, she’d sense something serious was going on.

“I have to go.” He said. “I’ll be back tomorrow, probably late in the day.”

“Where are you going ?”

“Finishing off some business.”

“Killing Samuel I bet.” She said. “Take me with you, we’re a good team.”

He held her hand tight.

“I’ve killed off five of my team already,” he said, “I’m not adding you to the list. Besides, Roland needs you here.”

“Fuck Roland, take me. You know I’ll just follow you around until you say yes.”

He sighed, he never should have come to the lab.

“Fine, we’ll need to kit up and get to the roof in about fifteen minutes.”

“Why the roof ?”

“Because that’s where the military VTOL is picking us up.”

~ ~

He’d brought a few things from home and Maria seemed to have come equipped for a full campaign. They were stood among their bags of kit, as the dark shape glided towards them, almost silently.

“What is that ?” Asked Maria.

“Ours, or will be if we take care of Samuel. Military stealth VTOL, the latest thing.”

“Wow !”

Maria looked spellbound, as the large craft lowered itself onto the roof and a side door opened.

“Bradford Scott ?” Enquired the guy at the door.

“Yeah, there’s two of us.”

“Fine. Get on board, we already have the destination loaded into navigation.”

They entered the craft and everything was black leather and serious looking dials. Maria was whispering to him.

“Loaded into navigation indeed. Who the hell has navi computers these days ?”

“Get strapped in.” Said the crewman. “You’ll need to, we climb fast.”

He vanished through a door and they chose two of the dozen or so seats. Each had a full body harness, the sort only normally worn by pilots.

“You heard the guy.” Said Bradford, buckling himself in.

The VTOL flew fairly level for about half a mile and then it began to gain speed and climb, eventually climbing at an angle of forty five degrees. They seemed to climb for at least fifteen minutes, before levelling out.

“Pressurised.” Said Maria. “It must be pressurised !”

She was looking around like a happy kid on Christmas morning.

“Engines that climb like that.” She continued. “What gives that kind of power ?”

Bradford was equally impressed, he just felt too embarrassed to show it.

“When it’s ours.” He said. “You can take a few panels off and have a look. Just don’t invalidate the warranty.”

It took a while for the novelty of high and fast flight to wear off, but there were no windows and after a while, Bradford pulled a map out of his bag.

“I have a source.” He said.

Even now, there was no way he was going to name Camila. She had to remain just a maid, that might keep her safe from the authorities.

“Samuel has a place prepared, for when he had to leave the Juniper Hotel.” He added. “Only tiny, but this thing can set us down silently.”

“The same source who gave us Jimmy’s Trainers ?”

“The same.”

He showed her the map of the speck of rock, only about five miles from the Juniper Resort.

“Two miles end to end, there’s nowhere for him to hide on the island.” He said.

Or them of course, but Maria would know that.

“One building and he won’t be there long.” Bradford continued. “No taking him prisoner, he dies and then you can film the body.”

“I’d like to bring his head back in a sack.” Said Maria.

“Me too, but the public are a bit squeamish.”

A head appeared from behind the cockpit door.

“Ten minutes and we’ll be there.”

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