

Bradford

Chapter 7 – The President

“The dead would be quietly removed in unmarked vans, to stop the media from gawping.”

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The weather forecast had been dry, yet a steady drizzle was soaking San Pablo. The global satellite network had long gone and weather forecasting was struggling. A local radio station had a morning forecast based on thumping the barometer and examining the colour of a jar of shark oil. Their forecast was famous for being far more accurate than the San Pablo weather centre.

“So why exactly did we get an invite ?” Asked Amoe.

“They choose a cop at random, from the list of last year’s commendations.” He lied.

Walking in the gardens of the Presidential Palace would have been nice, but everyone was stuck inside. Not that being in the banqueting suite was a hardship, there was room for several hundred people and the furnishings were luxurious to the point of opulence. Bradford looked through the windows, watching the rain soak the bougainvillea blooms.

“They still invited us ?” Persisted Amoe. “Despite the fact that you walked out of the job ?”

The questions didn’t worry Bradford, he had decided to take Maria’s advice. He’d rehearsed the potential questions and answers in front of the mirror, to get the look of sincerity just right. He loved Amoe and if it took bare faced lying to keep her, then so be it. He gave her a cheeky grin and laughed.

“You know government bureaucracy. They probably haven’t updated my file yet.”

She was smiling back at him and sipping champagne. Not real champagne of course, that didn’t exist anymore, but a passable Pacific sparkling wine. Bradford was happy, really happy, nothing was going to spoil that, especially the truth about his new life. Amoe looked sensational in a clinging black dress and Bradford found himself wondering how difficult it would be to take off.

“Just so long as I’ve finished my champagne, before they throw us out.” She said.

“Fancy seeing what the buffet has to offer ?”

“Why not.”

Bradford recognised a few faces, the police commissioner and the lady who gave most of the official media interviews. He didn’t envy them their fame, much better to remain in the shadows. Wild Bill was the other side of the buffet, though he merely nodded at Bradford. No one knew who knew what, so everyone was being very cautious.

“Oh wow, fresh caught Tuna.” Said Amoe. “Even my father can’t find fresh Tuna, anywhere.”

“One of the perks of being the president.”

Amoe turned and President Herbert was behind her. Bradford had seen him approach, he’d been looking forward to her reaction. Amoe’s father had stood against President Herbert once, hoping to win enough protest votes to at least give Herbert a run for his money. He hadn’t even come close. It was the voice of course, the voice that was worth several million votes.

“I’m so glad you could come Miss Lee.” Said the President. “I hope your father is well, please give him my regards.”

She was gone, Bradford thought Amoe might well vote against her father in future. The way she smiled, the slight sideways lean of her head. He recognised the signs of her becoming mildly infatuated. It crossed his mind that Herbert must have been up to his neck in pussy when he was at college.

“Thank you Sir.” Said Amoe. “It’s a genuine honour to be here. I’ll pass on your regards to my father.”

“Would you mind if I borrowed Bradford for a while ? Not for long I promise, there’s something I wish to ask him.”

“No, no of course not Sir.”

She’d used the word Sir twice, for a man her father had once described as the most corrupt politician in the Pacific Rim nations. It wasn’t just the film star voice, Herbert had charisma in bucket loads. The President beckoned over one of his female assistants.

“Please look after Miss Lee, while I talk to Bradford. Make sure she has enough to eat and drink.”

“Yes Sir.”

It was a nice touch, making sure Amoe had a friendly face in a room full of strangers. Bradford quickly kissed her on the lips and followed President Herbert and his small cloud of assorted security guards and assistants.

“We’ll talk in the garden house, it’s just been swept for bugs.” Said the President.

Bradford nearly asked if it had been swept for all types of bugs, but Herbert wouldn’t understand. Cram twenty million or more sweaty people into a sprawling semi-tropical city and you were bound to get bugs. Add the fact that half the population had no regular running water..... but Herbert was unlikely to have ever had to dig a skin bug out of his scrotum.

“You have a beautiful home.” Said Bradford.

“Sadly not mine.” Said Herbert. “If I lose the next election, someone else will be calling it home. It is nice though Bradford, a real privilege to live here.”

Gone was the rather arrogant swagger, the President was almost humble. Bradford had once been told that the public never voted a humble man into office, so Herbert had obviously learned to play the game. As if by magic, an aide produced several umbrellas and they were outside and walking across a sodden lawn.

“Not far Bradford, then we can talk.”

The garden house was a two storey wooden structure, at least a hundred feet in length. There were guards, lots of them, all looking drenched and miserable. Once inside the building, Herbert led the way to a study on the top floor and Bradford realised they were alone.

“I don’t normally have such a heavy guard.” Said Herbert. “My advisors tell me that some kind of tit for tat attack is likely from the Dysto-Guerra group.”

“Yes, sorry Sir. We’ve taken out seven of their hide outs and arrested some of their key people.”

Herbert actually slapped him on the back.

“Don’t apologise, you’ve had a hell of a first week in your new job and done some real damage to the subversives. I hear that you found quite a bit of good intelligence too.”

The President half-filled two balloon glasses with brandy and handed one to Bradford, before gesturing towards a comfortable looking leather chair.

“Yes Sir, we found information about the names and whereabouts of dozens of their key people. Some actually work in government agencies, which was a surprise. My squad are out tonight, making arrests.”

The chair was as comfortable as it looked and Bradford sipped the brandy and relaxed. The President sat opposite him, like two old chums, chewing over gossip.

“Do you think you’ll catch this Samuel character ?” Asked the President.

Maybe it was the brandy making him brave. Bradford moved the front of his jacket and pushed his tie over his shoulder. He could see the President, looking at him with curiosity, about what the hell he was up to. Bradford undid his shirt and showed him the scar, all eighteen inches of it.

"I'll get him Sir. I owe him payback for this, though I did mess his face up pretty bad at the time."

Herbert was sat back in his chair watching as Bradford put his clothing back the way it had been.

"William Cottingham is a good man, one of the best." Said Herbert. "But I think you could be better.

One day, perhaps in five years or so, I can see you doing his job."

"Head of all of PD489, me Sir ?"

"Perhaps head of all the security services. I've been thinking of bringing everything under the control of one department, one top guy. Who knows, it's early days, but that top guy might be you."

Bradford was shocked, the only thought in his head though, was how much Maria would hate it.

He'd still be her boss, even if she was director of intelligence.

"I don't know what to say Sir. Thank you, I'll do my best in any role I'm given."

"I'm sure you will. You like to get out in the field and that's what we need. I must let you get back to Amoe Lee, but there is a serious problem I wanted to discuss."

Here it came, Bradford tried to look calm, but he was worried. Loss of the APC, ignoring a bomb threat, not ensuring staff wore biohazard suits. It was all serious and Bradford had a deep anxiety about being sacked before he proved himself in the role.

"I know you have connections with Gillian McBride and LabSinc4. I believe you were introduced to them through your job ?"

"Yes Sir, they have provided me with performance enhancing medication of various kinds." Said Bradford.

"Not just medication. There are rumours that Gillian has given you access to medical enhancements, which were developed for the military."

The President was holding his hands up, but Bradford wasn't sure what he was trying to signify.

"They have been very helpful Sir." Said Bradford. "As long as they were helping me to be a better operative, I didn't ask too many questions."

"Quite so, of course you used any help you could get." Said Herbert. "You had a useless squad leader and left to your own devices."

President Herbert actually banged his hand on his chair arm for emphasis.

"I'll tell you Bradford. You've made far better use of those enhancements than the fucking military ever has."

It was confusing hearing that voice swear and it was a little disturbing.

"And of course," continued the President, "they'll have asked for a few favours in return ?"

Bradford had his limits when it came to truth, even with the President. Some of the favours he'd done for Gillian could gain him a life in prison, or even execution. He lied, he was getting better at it all the time.

"Just a few minor favours Sir."

"Nothing that would upset the cops or that fool Chris Dudley eh ?"

"That's about it Sir."

Bradford was no fool. There wouldn't have been the pep talk and promise of career progression, if he was about to be arrested. Yet President Herbert remained silent and simply stared at him for several minutes.

"Could you kill her if you had to ?" Asked Herbert.

"Sorry Sir..... who ?"

“Gillian McBride of LabSinc4. If she turned out to be a fucking terrorist. Could you put a hole in her head, with that highly efficient Ion weapon of yours ?”

Bradford didn't even need to think about it, the scenario had been playing through in his head for days. After seeing the bodies at Longmont Bus Station, he'd realised that killing Gillian might be a possibility.

“Yes Sir.” He said.

“Just Yes, no caveats, no qualifications, no conditions ?”

“If she was a threat to the nation, I would kill her.”

The President rose and went to his desk. He scribbled a quick note on a piece of paper, which he handed to Bradford.

“That is a direct line to a personal communicator. I want you to carry on with your favours for LabSinc4, but report everything you do for them to me. Will you do that ?”

“Yes Sir.”

The President was actually pulling him up out of the chair, so Bradford quickly finished his drink. It was far too much brandy, drunk far too quickly. He felt slightly intoxicated.

“Come on, we need to return you to that girl friend of yours.”

They were halfway back to the study door, when the President stopped and grabbed his arm.

“Everything Bradford, every detail. I know you haven't been totally truthful with me today and I can understand that. One of the main problems with being The President is that no one is ever fully honest with you. You need to tell me everything, ok ?”

“Yes Sir.”

“Don't you keep Yes Siring me ! I've seen your record and the only reason you're in your current job, is because I saw that you've always been loyal to San Pablo. You piss people off and cut corners, but you've always been completely loyal to the nation. You saw the bodies at Longmont Bradford, I just saw the recordings and they were bad enough. We can't have that happen to millions of our citizens can we ?”

“No Sir. Do you think LabSinc4 might be planning that ?”

“They may well be. One of our top bio-weapons people would appear to have been working for them for years and now he's missing. It's not good Bradford, not good at all. Even if they plan to use the weapon only on subversives, we can't allow that. Thousands of men, women and children, it's not right. Surely you see that ?”

Once Bradford wouldn't have cared how the subs died, or how many. Now though, after meeting Camila, he was having a little trouble with his own conscience.

“Yes Sir, I do understand that we can't allow that to happen. I give you my word. You will know everything that I know about Gillian and LabSinc4.”

“Good, good. Now let's see if there's anything decent left on the buffet.”

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Bradford was still using the pool car to get in to work on the Monday morning. Amoe had stayed over the weekend and most of the time they seemed to be either in bed or on the bed. His body was healing well, but there were a few tender spots. Two more days and he'd go back to being bounced about by his bike; he was already fed up with being stuck in the infamous traffic snarl ups on the expressway.

‘The tropical storm will move away from the Islands by Wednesday.’ The weather guy on the radio said.

It was the guy with the shark oil, so Bradford trusted the forecast. The storm had brought a lot of rain and coupled with the heat, San Pablo had become an unpleasant place to live. Unless you'd been naked all weekend and with a pretty girl, of course. His communicator crackled, nothing worked well in the damp atmosphere.

"Are you on your way?" Asked Roland. "I have your flapjacks and coffee."

"Just pulling into the garage."

He parked the car in the nearest bay, one of the perks of being a squad leader. A cheerful wave to the team in the garage and he was in the lift and heading for his office. Routine matters, it gives structure to the week, the day. The problem was that PD489 were in a line of work, where everything seemed to conspire against their routine. Maria would arrive about two seconds after he opened his office door, grabbing the largest flapjack for herself. It was a routine they'd created in just one week, everyone needed routines. Bradford unlocked his door and Roland brought in the tray, while Bradford cursed the weather and turned up the air con.

"Anything happen yesterday?" He asked Roland.

"Five murders, three major robberies and a significant drug arrest at the airport." Answered Roland.

"Nothing that falls inside our interests though."

"It's too quiet Roland, Samuel is planning something. I can feel it."

There were a lot of paid informers among the subs and they were all saying that some kind of attack by the Dysto-Guerra was imminent. It had been a long time since they'd done any serious damage, but Samuel would feel the need to hit back. As Bradford poured her coffee, Maria walked into his office and took the largest flapjack.

"So, how did the party with the President go?" She asked.

"Good, there was a live Jazz group, Amoe loved it."

"And the buffet. I heard they're famous. You did get fed well?"

He'd put on a brave face for Amoe, but he could be honest with Maria.

"A room full of cops or ex cops and the buffet was mostly fish and salad, some of the fish was raw. I saw two guys almost fighting over a plate of wedges, it was fucking torture."

Maria was laughing at him, which actually improved his mood.

"Did you piss him off, or does the President still love us?"

"He gave me his private communicator number, so I think we're still on the loved list."

Maria was pushing a scribbled list at him. For a woman who revelled in anything high tech, she seemed to have an odd love for scruffily written lists.

"Most of it isn't that expensive. It's just that whoever set the lab up, was a bit of an idiot." She said. Few of the items meant anything to him, though he doubted if a neutron particle analyser was likely to come with a low price tag.

"Yes why not." He said. "Do it properly, get Roland to help. You'll need to get a couple of quotes for the big stuff. Give me all the paperwork once you've prepared it and I'm pretty certain that I can push it through finance."

Maria was almost leaping about and he once again realised she was probably the biggest geek that he knew. Then she was pushing a large file across the desk and he recognised the pages of junk that came out of interrogation. You could ask them to push for certain information, but other departments wanted information too. The result was usually a massive transcript, which pleased no one. Maria had obviously spent much of her weekend, going through the bumf and writing little notes on it, in various coloured inks. He began reading her notes, with her adding a running commentary.

“They’ve interrogated about eight people who were senior cops or security service officers. None are ideologically in bed with the subversives, they’ve all been bought.” She said.

It was all there in her notes. Red ink for bribes, some of them huge sums. Green ink for the intelligence they’d sold and some of that was staggering.

“They know almost every secret we have.” Added Maria.

Blue ink was for names of their sub contacts and Samuel was mentioned quite a few times. Black ink was her assumptions about why Dysto-Guerra were so interested in certain information and what they hoped to gain. Several times, she’d written names of well-known places and flagged them as likely terror attack targets.

“You really think they’d attack San Pablo hospitals ?” He asked.

She merely looked concerned and nodded at him.

“It matched their recent obsession with wanting intelligence on just about everything medical and pharmaceutical on the islands.” She said.

Bradford knew other reasons for them being interested in medical facilities, he’d update Maria on the LabSinc4 doomsday weapon, when he felt the time was right.

“My conclusion on the last page might shock you.” She said.

He nibbled his flapjack, as he turned over the heaps of transcript and looked at her final conclusion, in purple ink.

‘As Chris Dudley was top of his year as a cadet. I have to conclude that he is neither stupid, lazy nor incompetent. Therefore it must be assumed that his lack of effectiveness as a squad leader, was due to being in the employ of a subversive group, probably Dysto-Guerra.’

Yes, of course. It was one of those things that was obvious, once someone else pointed it out. He drank some of his coffee and reflected on the fact that President Herbert had probably come to the same conclusion. It was why Bradford had been given the job.

“You’re right of course.” He said. “I think we should keep this between ourselves for a while. Until there is more proof.”

“Yes, he’s gone now anyway.” She replied. “He’s gone to the north islands and intends to become a farmer, or so I heard.”

Bradford had heard similar rumours. Now he wondered if Chris might be in the hands of someone’s interrogators, probably the President’s.

“There’s a lot more I want to tell you about Saturday.” He said. “But I have the usual Monday crap and paperwork. Do you fancy Sticky’s for lunch ?”

“Yes, I’ll even pay. After all, you are going to get me all my new lab toys.”

“And you can tell me why we need a neutron particle analyser.”

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Sticky’s was full of cops, which was normal. Serving cops, ex-cops, retired cops. They all thought of Sticky’s as their private diner and some had even had their funeral reception in there. Bradford parked the electric powered car right up against the windows. If it wasn’t safe outside Sticky’s, it wasn’t safe anywhere in San Pablo.

“All the window tables are taken.” Said Maria.

“There’s an empty table at the back.” Said Bradford. “It’ll be more private there anyway.”

Their table was grubby and Bradford’s chair had a wonky arm. No one came to Sticky’s for the décor though, they came for the food. Their order was taken quickly and they both ordered the beef teriyaki, which was superb. Cops needed to get fed and get out in an hour, ok, maybe ninety minutes on a boring Monday. They were enjoying coffee, when the atmosphere in the diner changed and one

of the staff tuned the screen, which was normally showing sports, to the main San Pablo news channel.

'News is just coming in.' Said the well-known anchor man. "There appears to have been a serious attack on the San Pablo police academy.'

"It'll be them," said Maria, "the subs. Fucking Samuel !"

It wasn't their crime scene yet and was unlikely to be for some time. Their phones weren't ringing, there was no immediate recall to base. The ambulances and the police would have the scene to themselves for a while. The police would get names from those well enough to go home, while medical teams took care of the wounded. The dead would be quietly removed in unmarked vans, to stop the media from gawping. Preserving evidence would be the last thing on anyone's mind and by the time PD489 had the crime scene to themselves..... there'd be little to find. They might find bomb fragments and discarded weapons. Forensic evidence would have been lost and contaminated to the point of being useless.

'The police are still unable to confirm if this is a terrorist attack, or another lone wolf atrocity.' The news continued.

Maria was using her phone, calling in to get an update. The news media would have been told little, there had been too many mistakes in the past. Lone wolves were becoming more sophisticated with each decade and no one wanted to shout 'terrorist,' and be wrong.

"Jeez Bradford." Said Maria. "Roland says it looks like they used two Carbide 6 devices. There are a lot of bodies."

She nodded a few more times at whatever Roland was telling her and ended the call.

"It's bad and Roland has been told twenty hours at least, until we can get in there." She added.

Fuel air devices had been around for quite some time, known as thermobaric weapons to the military of the long gone superpowers. They'd been the closest thing to nuclear explosions, without leaving nasty radioactive fallout. Researchers had continued developing the weapons, adding faster burning fuels and more energetic oxidants. The government labs of San Pablo, had discovered the effectiveness of a carbide catalyst in the mix and the Carbide 6 had been born.

"Aren't all Carbide devices under strict control of the military ?" He asked.

"Supposedly." Answered Maria. "Unless Samuel has been making his own."

"Nahhh, probably just buying them from someone in our own security forces."

The news wasn't showing any pictures of the academy, all media were being kept several miles from the scene and out of the airspace around the academy. Bradford could guess why, not much of the campus would be left standing.

"We need to get in there." Said Maria.

Sticky's was quiet, everyone seemed to be stunned by the news as they watched the story unfold on the screen. Bradford used his own phone to call the number the President had given him.

"Hello Bradford. I assume you're calling about the attack on the academy. Nasty business."

"Yes Sir. I really need to get in there, while the trail is still warm. Not a full team, just myself and Maria. Could your people arrange that ?"

For a few seconds, he could hear breathing on the line, but there was no reply. Maria was looking at him with a certain amount of disbelief.

"Yes that's a good idea Bradford, but I know things you don't." Said Herbert. "There were over five thousand people on the campus and none of the buildings are left. Nothing Bradford, not even the gatekeepers hut."

"Christ !! Sorry Sir, it's just that....."

"No need to apologise Bradford, I feel the same. I'll call the emergency co-ordinator myself and make sure they're expecting you, just show them your personal ID card."

"Thank you Sir."

"Just be sensitive to their losses Bradford. There are a lot of dead students and a lot of angry cops."

"I will be Sir, thank you."

The line was disconnected and Maria was still looking at him a little oddly.

"Yes Maria, that was the President and yes, we are going to the academy."

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It took nearly forty five minutes to get back to headquarters and get ready for an evidence search at the academy. They had to change into their usual PD489 clothing, pick up Maria's equipment and book out a small APC. It all seemed to take a ridiculous amount of time and it was mid-afternoon, before they were on the expressway, heading south east.

"It seems only yesterday that I was there Maria." He said.

"Well get him Bradford, make the bastard pay."

The police academy was in Joyce's Green, a small rural community, almost on the southern tip of the island. Bradford had enjoyed his time there, he'd made some real friends among the local community. Carbide 6 devices created a huge fireball and there had been two used. There might be little left of the town of Joyce's Green.

"Did the President have any idea of casualty numbers?" Maria Asked.

"No, he just said there were about five thousand people on the campus."

"Christ !!"

They drove on in silence for many miles, just stopping for something to nibble at a small village they passed through. They started to see the dust cloud, when they were still six or seven miles away from Joyce's Green. The edges were indistinct and the cloud was now beginning to descend, but it still looked like a nuclear mushroom cloud.

"The Carbide 6 burns hotter and longer than a tactical nuke." Said Maria. "I studied thermobaric weapons at college, for extra credit."

He had to stare at her, it seemed so in character and out of character at the same time.

"So ! I'm curious about stuff." She said. "Gimme a break."

The road block and fencing was about five and a half miles from Joyce's Green. There were several media transmitter vans parked in a nearby field and a small huddle of depressed looking reporters. The military had erected a small hut and a gate across the road.

"They're putting in steel uprights and hanging barbed wire." Said Maria. "None of this looks likely to be taken down, anytime soon."

She was right, the initial rolls of barbed wire, across the fields, was being replaced with two walls of steel mesh, all topped with Razor wire. The gate was guarded by half a dozen armed soldiers and they didn't even bother to ask their business.

"Sorry, you'll need to turn around. The road south has been closed until further notice. I have a number you can call, if you have relatives who normally reside in the controlled zone."

Controlled zone ! It was all sounding rather ominous. Bradford handed the soldier his ID card, or tried to, the soldier didn't seem to want to take it.

"Sorry, I have my orders. You'll need to turn around."

It was the ID that said he was a senior executive, with the sanitation department. Hardly guaranteed to impress anyone, but Bradford knew he had to get past the soldiers.

"I'm Bradford Scott, you should have been told about me !" He shouted. "I'm a specialist, working directly for President Herbert. He called your boss, personally."

The soldier grudgingly took the ID, ensuring that Bradford's face did match the picture.

"Watch them." He said to his colleague.

The soldier went into the hut, no doubt to ask someone in charge, if they were expecting a specialist called Bradford Scott.

"It must be really bad." Said Maria. "They're scared of anyone seeing Joyce's Green and letting the public know how much destruction there is."

Bradford watched the nervous soldiers and the teams building fences. The mushroom cloud was still there, but soon it would be lost in the darkness of night.

"The President told me things were bad." He said. "There will be a lot of worried parents and relatives. The truth will come out eventually, though not until after the government have had a chance to sweeten it, put a few subversives up against the wall."

The soldier eventually gave him his ID back and told him they were cleared to enter the restricted zone. There were trucks the other side of the fence, loaded with more troops. It was what governments did after such atrocities, they over reacted, the public almost expected it.

"Not a good time to be homeless." He said. "The cops will be rounding up everyone wearing a dirty T shirt in a built up area."

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The good thing about entering a restricted zone, is that once you're inside it, everyone knew you had permission to be there. Truck convoys waved them past, barriers were raised as they approached. One soldier even called him sir. The mushroom cloud filled the sky, as they saw the scorched road sign that told them they were half a mile from Joyce's Green. The trees and bushes around it had gone, just a few blackened twigs remained.

"No one could have survived this." Said Maria.

The road went downhill to approach the coast and the small town of Joyce's Green should have been in front of them. Boomers the cadets called it, following the military tradition that any local town is 'Boom Town,' even if it has just half a dozen houses and motel. Bradford pulled up, the scene below had to be wrong, he'd been there only a year or so before. He was pointing through the windscreen, eager to show that something familiar remained.

"The church tower is still there." He said. "And the stone bridge over the river."

They drove on, through a steady rain of ash particles, as the mushroom cloud continued to descend. He could still drive, the visibility was still fine, but they had to find somewhere to stop before night.

They were waved over the bridge in Joyce's Green, though little remained of the town. Maria had a Geiger counter in her hand, he wasn't surprised that she'd brought one.

"They weren't lying." She said. "Just background radiation."

The military presence seemed quite light as they drove on, towards the police academy. It took time to mobilise a large force and the soldiers already on the scene, were probably building perimeter fences.

"I was prepared for this." Said Bradford. "Less shocking than seeing Joyce's Green."

"Where was the main building ?"

"There." He said, pointing at what looked like builders rubble.

The rain began and Bradford remembered something about thermobaric weapons and rain. The heat put all the moisture out of the ground into the air and then it fell as rain, lots of rain. It was

mixing with the ash fall and the screen wipers were having problems. The problem was that the road wasn't clear in places and there were pits, where buildings had collapsed.

"Can you see anywhere safe to park for the night?" He asked.

"There, I saw tail lights."

He looked to where she was pointing and saw a brief flicker of red. He drove slowly and had to get out into the rain twice, to wipe the screen with the sleeve of his coat. At least four heavy vehicles had been parked on what had to be firm ground. Then a soldier was waving a torch at their vehicle and motioning Bradford to lower the window. He was young and didn't have weatherproof clothing, his uniform was soaked.

"I was sent to meet you Sir, you took longer to get here than I expected."

"I studied here, sorry.....we stopped to look..... it was just....."

"Of course Sir, I kept a space for your vehicle. Park to the right of the tanker and then I'm to take you to see the DisOps."

Disaster and Emergency had been renamed the department for major incidents, it sounded less startling to an already jumpy public. The guy who ran it was still affectionately known as the Disaster Operations Controller, or DisOps for short. It didn't surprise Bradford that he was there, it did surprise him that Graham Molyneux was actually taking the time to see them.

"Take this, we have spares." Said Maria.

She handed the young soldier a simple coverall, which went over his head and kept the wind and rain out. Similarly attired and carrying their kit, they followed him across the blasted and scorched landscape.

"Any idea how they got the weapons here?" Asked Bradford.

"Carbide 6 devices aren't light. Maybe a plane dropped it?" Added Maria.

"They've had an overflight ban here for days, there were no incidents with any unknown aircraft, that was the first thing we checked. Their computer is mirrored to HQ, we know what happened up to the second of detonation and it wasn't dropped from an aircraft." Said the soldier.

"Trucks then." Said Bradford. "Any construction work going on?"

"Every vehicle in or out, has been thoroughly scanned and physically checked, since the attacks two years ago."

They walked over an area, which Bradford seemed to remember had been the staff parking area. Only staff with tenure though, others had to park a further hundred yards away. The famous library should have been to their left, but once again it looked like a spoil heap, left behind by an untidy builder.

"The library had five basement levels." Said Bradford.

The young soldier stopped and looked at the ruined library.

"We found most of the survivors down in the three lowest levels." He said. "We found very few wounded, injured or dead. People tended to be fit and well, or....."

He kicked the ground sending up a pile of grey ash.

"They were burned to ash and cinders. We may never have a full list of who died here, or anything for their families to bury."

They carried on in silence, across two more car parks and past several more flattened buildings. The heat had turned some building materials into strange twisted shapes, almost artistic. Everything looked like a strange alien world, rather than an academy in a quiet rural town.

"Just about everyone lives here." Said their guide. "Though I'm not sure if we have a spare tent. You might find it more comfortable in your APC."

He led them through a tent town, literally hundreds of tents of assorted shapes and sizes. Some were marked as male and female latrines and there were frequent tents marked as showers. One particularly large tent was sign posted in four languages as the place to go for meals.

'Food that would make your mother cry.' Some comedian had added to the sign.

The tent town was part of the well-rehearsed drill to deal with natural disasters and manmade ones. Now though, the drill was being used for real. The soldier, who still hadn't told them his name, left them at the flap of a large beige coloured tent.

"Just go in, they're expecting you."

He was gone, vanished into the bustle of the camp.

Maria opened the tent flap and went inside, Bradford following her. A soldier was sat at a desk, dealing with a query from a man in a blood covered shirt. The man looked depressed by the answer to his query and wandered away, it was obviously their turn.

"Bradford Scott and Maria Gonsalves." Said Bradford. "We are expected."

"Bradford ! Bradford Scott, is that you ?"

The voice was male and coming from the back of the tent, an area partitioned off with makeshift canvas screens. A head appeared through the screens.

"You took your fucking time. The DisOps expected you an hour ago."

It was all said at maximum volume and Bradford found himself apologising again, though they'd had no control over most of the delays. Their new guide had a mop of ginger hair and took them into a small area, where a man was eating chili and drinking coffee. Bradford suddenly realised how hungry he was.

"Sit down, I think there's just enough room for both of you." Said Graham Molyneux, the current DisOps for San Pablo and the islands it ruled.

Bradford knew Graham, everyone did, his face was used on all the civil defence posters in San Pablo and he appeared in government information broadcasts. They squeezed themselves onto two tiny chairs, that looked almost like garden furniture.

"Sorry we're late." Said Bradford.

"Oh don't worry. I expect the guys on the perimeter gave you some hassle."

Bradford was beginning to like Graham Molyneux. They were offered coffee, which Ginger brought for them. Yes their guide was known, rather unimaginatively, as Ginger.

"They'll need one of our communicators too Ginger."

Ginger vanished and the DisOps spread a photocopy map over the floor.

"The map is yours." He said. "After the President called, we put together everything we had, but it isn't much I'm afraid. We're fairly certain that the subversives gained access to the tunnels under the campus."

The map consisted of about four sheets of A3, sticky taped together. Maria removed her shoulder mounted camera from her bag and ran it over the map. Graham pointed at the floor plan for basement level 4 of the library.

"The tunnels go everywhere; they're an all-weather means of getting around the campus and form part of the emergency shelter provision." He said.

"I used them all the time when I studied here." Added Bradford.

"Don't expect them to be the same, there have been a lot of cave-ins and some parts are flooded from burst water pipes." Said Graham. "Here are where the devices exploded."

He was pointing at areas highlighted with orange marker. Several concentric rings had been drawn, centred on an area under the main building and another under the student dormitory block.

“So they used the tunnels, I did wonder about that.” Said Bradford.

“Yes, the tunnels run right out to a small harbour on the coast.” Said Graham. “I’m told that each Carbide device weighs a little over half a ton. They must have put them on some kind of trolley and simply wheeled them in from the harbour.”

“Anyone seeing them would think they were delivering equipment.” Said Maria.

Graham was looking rather serious.

“We’re not releasing that information to the public yet, it might cause concerns.” He said.

“Also makes us look damn stupid.” Added Ginger.

He’d returned, holding a small hand held comms device.

“The public transmitters are all destroyed.” He said. “But you can contact us and we can link you through to your own people.”

He offered the comms unit to Bradford, but Maria grabbed it.

“I can patch this into our comms and create a seamless link with our comms server.” She said.

Bradford merely nodded; there were times when it was nice to have her IT skills around.

“When do you intend to enter the tunnels?” Asked Graham.

It meant another night with little sleep, but there was no point in moaning about ruined evidence, if they didn’t act immediately.

“We’ll go now.” Said Bradford. “I’m sure Maria has everything she needs.”

She was nodding at him and fiddling with the comms unit, fitting a cable to the PD489 device.

“We’re short numbered.” Said Graham. “You may find survivors and more unpleasant things down there. No dead have been removed from the tunnels yet.”

“Call us if you find anyone alive.” Said Ginger. “I’ll get a medical team sent down there.”

Maria had scanned the map, she’d be able to project an HD version of it on just about any surface.

Bradford still picked up the tatty copy and folded it, leaving it open at the page with the library tunnels. He knew that area and it was well away from the detonation sites. If there was a safe way of getting into the tunnels, it would be at level S4 of the library. It was also where any survivors might be, though they weren’t his first priority. It was personal for Bradford, he wanted information on where he could find Samuel.

“Food.” Said Ginger. “The cook has produced a fairly edible meal, so you must spare a few minutes to eat. It might be your last chance for a while.”

Maria was looking at him hopefully, they were both hungry.

“Fine, but then we must get to the library and find a way down to S4.” Said Bradford.

“I can get someone to show you where the survivors emerged from.” Said Ginger.

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