

Bradford

Chapter 16 – Destiny Mall

“The strange sense of wellbeing descended on him, the one he always had when going into combat. It was what he lived for, what he’d been augmented for.”

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Parking took longer than it should have; Enrique had obviously looked at plans of the huge parking tower. He was good; Shereen had to admit that to herself. If anyone was watching, it would appear as though he was looking for a space near an exit ramp, but he was looking for something else too. “There.” He said, pointing. “Level eight, but we can be on the street in five minutes.”

The space was up against a concrete support and the passenger side was in shadow and screened from the inevitable security camera. On a quiet day the space would have been avoided by most, but the Mall was surprisingly busy. Shereen waited for Val to open her door. If you feel like a prisoner, you might as well do it in style.

“There are a lot of people here.” Said Shereen. “I normally park on level three or four.”

“They’re promoting a new movie in the long garden area.” Said Enrique.

“People running about made up like zombies.” Added Val. “And a few famous actors. Perfect for us, everyone will be watching the film stunts.”

The occasional scream, maybe even gunfire, all put down to the theatrics of the people promoting their zombie film. They probably obtained their public display permit before the recent troubles with Dysto-Guerra. Shereen tried to show no emotion about the families who’d be in the Mall. She’d play the role of happy spoiled airhead, being bought lots of nice clothes and accessories. She beamed at Val.

“Versace first, then Gucci !” She exclaimed.

Every town had a Versace, a Dior, a Gucci and other famous named stores. Nothing to do with the original owners, but there wasn’t anyone to sue them for improper use of a brand name. The public knew the Versace in San Pablo wasn’t ‘The’ Versace, but they didn’t care. The names on the labels added a certain panache and the clothes were reasonably well made. Shereen wanted her excitement to be contagious, she wanted them to trust her.

“Ok, ok,” said Val, “Versace it is.”

Shereen insisted on buying a huge box of Belgian truffle chocolates on the way. Nothing Belgian about them, but no one seemed to worry about that. Nice though, worth the bundle of San Pablo dollars that Val had paid for them. How much could she spend ? Part of it was cover and part of it was giving the condemned woman a happy evening. She could see it in their eyes when they thought she wasn’t looking. The look she’d given a rabbit that her father had decided was plump enough for Sunday lunch.

“You must have one Enrique..... see you can smile when you want to.”

She flirted with both of them, making them happy too. Versace was empty, everyone was outside watching Snake Plissken save San Pablo from the next zombie apocalypse. Old names and ideas being recycled, it was kind of what San Pablo was all about. Snake was being played by an actor with Chinese ancestry, trying to sound like Kurt Russell. No one cared, it would make money, action films always did.

“This is so your colour.” Said Val.

It was and the size was perfect. No more strange antics in changing rooms, Shereen took an hour to choose four nice dresses, two pairs of shoes and a whole pile of expensive underwear. Val's bag seemed to have an unending supply of large denomination dollar notes and her clothes were soon paid for.

"Where next?" Asked Enrique, actually grinning at her.

Shereen didn't feel bad about manipulating them, she was using the weapons she'd been given in life. That was why she'd readily agreed to afternoon sex with Mike Lakey. A gun in her bag would be useless to her, but she knew how to charm people, or bitch at them until their ears bled, if needed.

"You said Gucci." Said Val.

There were no clocks. The Mall used the same trick as casinos. No clock to let you know it was time to be somewhere else.

"Is there time?" She asked.

"Just, if we're quick."

Two floors down and across a bridge that looked far too frail to hold the army of shoppers trudging across it. More nibbles of course;

"You choose Enrique."

"He always chooses something with liquorice in it," said Val, "ewwwwww."

Enrique gave his sister a playful thump on the arm and chose a box of outrageously expensive sugar coated sweets. 'Parisienne Bonbons,' it said on the box, though they'd probably been made in San Pablo. Paris was long gone, one of the first victims of the great floods. Names hung on though, like ghosts visiting from a brighter and more carefree past.

"Oh, these are to die for." Said Shereen.

Gucci was quiet, even the assistants were at the windows, watching zombies go past on motorcycles. Shereen chose a few accessories, mainly a decent bag and two leather belts.

"These will go perfectly with my jeans at home."

Yes, she did see the look exchanged between brother and sister. Shereen was working to a schedule.

She carefully examined the shop assistant's watch and decided that she simply had to look at the small travel case again. Not too early back at the car, she'd told Bradford to be ready at about eight.

"It is perfect for weekend breaks." Said the assistant.

Once again Val paid for it all. The pile was becoming difficult to carry, even spread across all three of them. It was about five past eight and Val was suggesting it was time to put her new clothes in the car.

"Yes." Said Shereen. "Then we can get dinner somewhere."

They were outside Gucci now, loaded down with lots of boxes tied with colourful string.

"Dinner will be somewhere else..... after." Said Val.

Val looked serious and nodded her head slightly at her. After meant after Destiny Mall was full of dead families and they were miles away, enjoying a pizza. Only Shereen wouldn't be with them. She'd never get a chance to wear the clothes, or use the lovely weekend case.

"Yes, I understand." She said.

The atmosphere changed slightly on the way back to the car, but they weren't treating her like a prisoner. Shereen wasn't brave though, not in that way. Running off into the crowd wasn't something she'd be able to do. They'd just catch her and the shoppers would think it was all part of the show.

Enrique neatly folded what needed folding and put her purchases into the trunk. He'd obviously been well trained by Mike. He had the pathogen out of the carry case and into the back pack, in a matter of seconds.

"Don't let us down." Said Val. "Don't let Mike down."

"I won't."

Enrique pushed a small switch and then checked a tiny red light was winking at them.

"It's armed and ready." He said.

"Take it to the long garden," said Val, "where they're promoting the movie. Press the button and shove it behind a bush. No one will notice it."

Shereen gave them her best smile and put the backpack over her shoulder. Death to tens of thousands, in a backpack with a green floral pattern. The red blob was the centre of a flower; she'd have to be careful how she touched that part of the pack. Was there a timer? Would it go off anyway, once she'd been given enough time to get to the busy areas of the Mall? Her handlers didn't seem in a hurry to leave, so she hoped not.

"Good luck." Said Val.

Enrique just smiled.

"I'll be back soon." Said Shereen. "Don't leave without me."

The look between them again, they genuinely looked sad. A fraction of a second and they were smiling again and watching her walk towards the long garden.

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One solitary cop had turned up to deal with the call. At least a dozen of Bradford's neighbours, her neighbours now, had called in an attempted rape and the death of the perpetrator. The East Central cops had sent one bored looking cop in a van to deal with it.

"It'll be drugs." The cop had told her. "Utopia is big around here. It fries their brains and all they think about is sex and getting more drugs."

Camila now had ID, Bradford had given it to her. The cop barely glanced at it. No statement taken down, no interviewing her neighbours and no offer of counselling for her or Sofia. He hadn't even asked why a kid had been carrying a blaster. He did give her a leaflet on how to make her home more secure. Camila had often thought the legit city dwellers had it made. Now she wasn't so sure. "Drugs!" He said as he left. "Fries their fucking brains."

An unmarked van from the morgue had turned up an hour or so later, to remove the body. The two guys who took away the body asked more questions than the cop. They said the same as the cop as they left.

"Drugs! Utopia 78 is out and it's driving the stoners crazy."

Which was a polite way of saying the drugs were frying their fucking brains. Only the guy hadn't been on drugs, he didn't even look or smell like a druggie. The children recovered from it all remarkably quickly and were out on the walkway again within an hour or so. It quickly became old news to the neighbours too. Violent death was common place in San Pablo. Dying peacefully in old age was the rarity.

"Keep the door locked and no seeing Esteban tonight."

"Yes mama, I mean no mama."

Camila had a jacket with a hood and enough tools to break into the van. She'd even found out that Lou, the building manager, was out on a date until late. He was taking a divorcee to the Destiny Mall for some shopping and dinner. The actors from the latest Snake Plissken film were putting on a bit of a show at the Mall. She wagged her finger at Sofia.

“Phone messages are fine.” She said. “But no one in the apartment.”

“Yes mamma, I promise.”

Camila had the new blaster that Bradford had given her. She handed her old one to Sofia, complete with its charger. Was she too young? Probably, but Camila had been about the same age, when her father had given her a weapon.

“Here, this is yours now. Use it if someone tries to get in.”

It wasn't quite dark, which was how Camila liked it. Full daylight was a problem and the car park lights would come on when their sensors decided it was dark enough. The short San Pablo twilight was perfect for things like breaking into vans. Not enough light to be quite be sure what you were seeing. The brain played tricks, filling in gaps in what you saw, trying to make sense of what was almost seen. It was why there were so many car crashes at dusk and why it was so loved by thieves.

“Another minute.” She muttered to herself.

Camila crouched by the car park wall, almost invisible with her hood up and gloves on. When she was happy with the twilight, she walked towards the van and gave it a hefty shove. Nothing, no alarms going off or flashing lights. There might be a silent notification going out to someone, but she was going to risk that.

Speed now, get the rear doors open and get inside before anyone noticed. She used a flat steel jemmy to break the lock and pull the doors open. Three seconds, maybe five and she was looking into the back of the van with a small flashlight. Camila put her foot up to climb into the van and she froze.

“It can't be!” She muttered.

There had been a silent alarm and they must have been waiting in one of the other vehicles. Camila felt the needle enter her neck and then everything was blackness. No dreams, no remembered thoughts, just the blackness that a strong dose of ketamine can cause.

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The Destiny Mall was usually fairly quiet during the week, but Bradford hadn't included the film company in his plans.

“Someone should have cancelled their permit.” Said Gupta.

“We'll just have to work round them.” Said Bradford.

“Everything stops for the movies.” Someone added.

It was true, no one in the government would have dared to cancel the promotion tour of the latest Snake Plissken epic. Zombies too, Amoe had been talking about seeing it when it came out on memory cube. The car park attendant looked suspiciously at the four vans, until Amoe flashed her cop ID.

“Seen anything strange this evening.” She asked him.

He pointed at two actors dressed as zombies, chasing a shrieking woman across the front of the Mall.

“Are you kidding lady?”

They were on the tenth floor before finding a place to park and it was already after eight. Bobby and his guys were old hands, they melted into the crowds and promised to keep in touch. Even Bobby blended in, his five grand suit mixing in with the primary colours worn by kids and the casual wear of the adults.

Only Bradford's people looked out of place. They even seemed to stand to attention to wait for their orders. Even in casual wear, something about them screamed cop.

“Relax.” Said Bradford. “Think of this as a night out with friends.”

It wouldn't work. There were dozens of interns, all wanting one of the few appointed posts with PD489. The last thing any of them were with each other, was friends.

"Do you like ice cream ?" Asked Amoe.

"Yeah, vanilla twist." One said.

"Ewww no, boring." Someone answered.

They argued and it sounded natural. Bradford gave them orders to carry on bickering, buy ice creams and mingle.

"Don't all go to watch the film people." He called , as they walked away.

He checked that Gupta was in contact with everyone, Gillian was keeping him company and then it was just him and Maria, stood beside the vans. Amoe had gone off with the interns, to stop them standing to attention and frightening the shoppers.

"I do wonder if this is hopeless." He said.

"No." Said Maria. "We know where Shereen will be. Only place that makes sense."

"Right in the middle of the film people in the long garden."

Maria was nodding at him, as they both walked towards the moving stairs. Eight twenty now, he hoped that Shereen wouldn't do anything stupid if he was late.

"They had to pick that target." Said Maria.

"Yes," agreed Bradford, "kill a few thousand people and it's a national disaster. Kill Snake Plissken and the other actors and it'll be national mourning."

The moving stairs weren't moving fast enough, so they moved over to the emergency stairs and began to sprint down them. It seemed to take forever to reach the ground floor garden level and they were both panting. There was a clown and three elves stood near the stairs, all looking depressed.

"The Mall clown can't compete with zombies." Said Maria.

"Pepe." Said Bradford. "He's Pepe, Amoe loves him."

Bradford waved, but Pepe didn't wave back. It's a bad day when you're upstaged by the living dead. The long garden was full of families who'd taken their kids to see Snake and the zombies. Over tired kids who should have been in bed. Crowds of zombies stumbled through the crowds, growling at people and then posing for pictures. The big event of the next twenty minutes, was a stunt guy, dressed as a zombie, jumping a motorcycle over fifteen scantily dressed young women. There was no reason or justification for it, someone had decided it would be fun.

"Only in San Pablo." Said Maria.

The announcer shouted that the last time the trick had been attempted, the bike had landed short. No mention of the poor girl the bike had landed on, that too was typical San Pablo. The news didn't seem to worry the girls, who were lying side by side on the Mall floor. Bradford thought it sounded a pretty cool trick too, but he'd never admit that to Maria.

"Count him slowly down from ten folks !" Shouted the announcer.

"Ten !" The crowd roared.

The stunt rider revved his bike, one of the few methane burning bikes that Bradford had ever seen. His attention was taken up by the bike and he might have missed seeing Shereen.

"Nine !"

A zombie growled at him and Bradford smiled and politely told him to fuck off. As he did so, he noticed Shereen sat right behind the scantily clad potential accident victims. He smiled at her and she looked down at her lap and put her finger to her lips. They were watching her from somewhere,

it made sense. If he'd planned the operation, he'd have two people watching from a safe distance, until the device went off. How close was safe though ?

"Eight !"

Bradford connected with Gupta.

"Shereen in long garden, near bike stunt. She's probably being watched."

"I'll tell everyone and Gillian is coming down."

"Tell her to use the emergency stairs they're quickest."

"Seven !"

The stunt guy deliberately dropped the throttle back and made the bike pop a bit. Would it let him down ? Oh no, the poor girls ! It was all part of the show and Bradford loved all of it.

"Six !"

Bradford noticed Shereen looking up and to her left. A man in casual clothing, raising his arm, leaning over a walkway several floors up.

"I'll see if I can get behind him." Said Maria, running for the stairs.

Bradford ignored the zombies trying to keep the area clear for the bike stunt and ran towards Shereen.

"Five !"

Bradford knew it was myth that people could feel a bullet just miss them. He'd had a few fired at him and unless they hit your hair or clothing, you had no idea of being a fraction of an inch from death. Blasters were different though, the ionised air formed a heat wake. He felt the heat on his forehead and then one of the zombies screamed. A girl zombie, with a hole burned in her side. The crowd actually cheered, thinking it was part of the show.

"Four !"

Bradford had the new Henriksen blaster that Bobby had given him. It had a rapid fire button on the side. Bradford pulled the trigger and a dozen Ion bolts hit the walkway where the man had fired from. It didn't matter that Bradford had fired slightly wide, the burst of fire burned through the walkway, disintegrated the overhead lighting and killed the gunman. No doubt, no wondering, no one could have survived the destruction. The public never got to three on the countdown, most of them were now screaming and heading for the doors.

"Down Shereen !" Shouted Bradford. "There will be more than one of them."

People were getting in his way, some even still grinning like fools and believing they're still watching an act of some kind. Another blaster being fired, again from Shereen's left side. This time the angle indicates a shot from the garden area itself.

"Shereen ! Duck !"

No response, it's as if she wants to die. She's still got one hand on the back pack, keeping it up against her, using her body to shield it. Another shot and it goes past him this time and hits the stunt bike, rupturing the methane tank. The bike's tank would have been designed to deal with small leaks, but not blaster fire. A huge fireball fills that side of the long garden and the public panic. Luckily they're running away from where Bradford wants to get to, but there is still someone trying to kill him.

Another shot, maybe two that miss him, but one hits a woman in the crowd. Still Shereen is just sat there, looking at him and bringing up a finger.

"One of them !" She shouts, "There." Pointing.

Too much noise to hear her clearly, but he lip reads and looks to where she's pointing. The woman is keeping herself in the crowd, using them as cover. She's being jostled though, probably the only

reason that he's still alive. She fires and misses again, but someone else behind him scream. That part of the crowd tries to get away from the crazy woman with the blaster, so she runs into another group of terrified shoppers. Always covered so he can't fire back, but never being able to get a steady aim at him.

Stalemate, until Bradford sees someone he recognises. Gillian, coming out of a lift door and carrying a fire extinguisher, one of the heavy metal ones that seem to be everywhere in public places. She has it up on her shoulder and he can see what she intends to do with it.

"Hey, hey you !" He shouts at the woman. "You want me so bad ! Come and get me."

Bradford faces her and bring his blaster down to rest against his side. He can hear her shouting, her voice rising above the general noise of the fire and the crowds.

"You killed my brother !"

She's out in the open now, taking time to aim at him, getting her blaster steady, controlling her breathing. Still he does nothing, hoping he wasn't going to be remembered for dying in a very stupid way. Gillian didn't let him down though; she brought the extinguisher down on the girls head and caved in her skull. She had to be dead, he saw bits of hair, blood and bone flying everywhere.

"Thank you !" He shouted at Gillian.

Gillian picked up the girl's blaster and nodded in the direction of Shereen. She's gone, but the backpack was still there. He ran to the backpack, but then hesitated to open it, his hands were actually shaking. He had to hurry though, the fire around the stunt bike was getting worse by the minute.

"Let me." Said Gillian. "I did build the damn thing."

He watched as she unzipped the bag and looked inside, turning it slightly to get it under the lights. She had her hand inside the thing and he can hear glass clinking against glass.

"All there." She said.

He looked in the bag and saw lots of fragile glass orbs, filled with the pale green pathogen. They were protected by a thin aluminium cover that didn't even cover the top. Enough to protect them from the odd jostle, but not from blaster fire, or a serious blow. Gillian pulled a wire out of a connector and smiled at him.

"And now it's disarmed." She said.

No sign of Shereen though, she probably had her own plans on how to escape. He hoped she made it to wherever she was going, they couldn't have recovered the pathogen without her. He called Gupta on the small two way radio Gillian had been carrying.

"We have it Gupta, all of it. Tell Roland and tell him to make it official. Tell everyone !"

Procedure demanded that he waited for some kind of safe containment to arrive, but to hell with procedure, that part of the Mall was soon likely to be engulfed by fire. Bradford picked up the pack and carried it over his shoulder and out of the Mall.

"One of her shots got the clown." Said Gillian.

"Pepe, his name was Pepe."

Pepe had been hit in the chest and his clowning days were over. The three elves had vanished, probably ran away in the general panic. Bradford sat on a low wall beneath a sign;

'The Destiny Mall – Largest Retail Mall in San Pablo.' It proudly said.

He called Gupta and told him to drive round to pick them up. He also added;

"Tell them Shereen has gone, but she's not the type to be a threat to anyone. Tell Roland to make sure they don't set the dogs on her."

Maria appeared, covered in soot and looking dejected. She brushed off her clothes and sat beside him on the wall.

"I got the wrong side of the stampede." She said.

"No problem." He replied.

Eventually she'd tell him the full story, probably over dinner at Sticky's. Amoe was driving when the van pulled up and they climbed inside.

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Sofia looked at the clock and knew something was wrong. Her mother had told her it was going to be just a quick look inside the van.

"A quick look and then I'll tell Bradford if it's serious." Her mother had said.

Now it was late, so late that something really bad must have happened. She shook her brother awake and waited until he was properly awake and likely to remember her words.

"Mamma is late." She said. "Probably nothing, but I'm going out to look for her."

"Ok."

He was asleep again, how did he do that ? Perhaps it was as well that he was too young to worry, he'd have plenty to get stresses about once he was a grown man. Gangs, the cops, drugs, San Pablo wasn't an easy place to grow up in. She put on her outside clothes and made sure she had a set of keys in her pocket. Then she heard a key in the lock and relaxed. Sofia ran into the hallway and turned on the light.

"I was so worried." She said. "Did it go ok ? What was in the van ?"

The face coming through the door wasn't her mother's. He smiled and put a finger to his lips, while aiming a blaster at her face.

"Not going to be any trouble are you ?" He asked.

"No. Where is my mother ?"

"All in good time girl, all in good time."

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PD489 were heroes again, but of course the public would never know. President Herbert was due to appear for a five minute special after the late news. He'd already congratulated Bradford and promised that a few more high tech goodies would be provided to PD489.

"Officially I'll be saying that my new Anti-Terror Task Force recovered the pathogen. We both know the truth though and I'm very proud of you all." Herbert had said.

"I'm just glad that the problem has been resolved."

"Any news on Mike Lakey ?"

"No. My guess is that he's now with whoever was paying him." Said Bradford. "Probably one of the New Nations."

There was the now familiar few seconds of silence, while the president thought things over.

"You're probably right Bradford, but we'll keep him on the most wanted list for a while."

The president was calling one of his people over and shouting about something. Then he was back on the line.

"You're sure the list of Cherish vaults we have is complete Bradford ?"

"Yes sir, that's all of them."

"The Cherish organisation aren't being completely helpful, but they have agreed to lock those vaults tight until an independent inspection can take place..... loose ends Bradford, we can't have loose ends."

"No sir, I can appreciate that."

The call had ended and a loose end was sat in the lab with Maria. What was he going to do with Gillian McBride ? Roland had suggested a false ID and putting her on the payroll at PD489. He'd heard stranger ideas and Maria wasn't going to be content with the grunt work for much longer. Roland suggesting it was the really bizarre thing, Bobby Laszlo was having an effect on him, probably a beneficial effect.

"I love the way you get coffee and flapjacks." Said Amoe.

She'd been sat in his office, listening to everything. Amoe was one of them now of course, one of the few to know about his real job. She'd been grinning at him constantly, obviously delighted that he wasn't an executive with the sanitation department. He'd shoed her out of the office to talk to the president, but nothing else had been kept from her.

"Roland knows my weakness for flapjacks." He replied.

She beamed at the flapjacks and smiled at the coffee. She didn't even moan about the awful view from his window of the school yard and the staff eating area.

"Did you call your parents ?"

Her smile went. He thought she'd have gone straight home, but they were her family, he wasn't going to push her. Bradford had already decided that he loathed her father, but you can't choose your in-laws.

"Yes." She answered. "I must go home, but I'm not looking forward to it."

"Why not ?"

"My mother was crying, but I expected that..... Dad though..... he seemed really angry with me. I hadn't expected that."

A key card was on his desk, a present from Bobby. There was also a new owner welcome pack, which he'd dropped into his drawer. Bradford knew what was waiting for him in the garage, it just seemed inappropriate to be too keen on dropping everything to look at it. Mike Lakey was still on the run, Shereen hadn't been seen and there was still the shit storm from Operation Janus to clear up. Still, he couldn't wait any longer. He picked up the key card.

"Come on." He said. "There's something I want to look at downstairs."

Honesty and a hatred of corruption was going to be the problem. Not his, Bradford had no problem with receiving a kick back gift from Bobby Laszlo. Bobby was receiving a lot of good quality government kit, it was only right for Bradford to receive a finder's fee. It was just that Amoe was far more sensitive about such things. He wouldn't lie to her though, he'd just twist the truth about a little. They came out of the elevator and walked towards the rear of the garage.

"She's a real beauty sir." Said one of the mechanics. "And ready to be used."

The badge on the fuel pod said BMW, but the motorbike was produced in San Sebastian by a company known as CCST. They made the best bikes in the New Nations and Bradford had wanted a CCST since he'd been about twelve years old. Fast, built well, looked fantastic and sought after.

There was a five year waiting list, but Bobby obviously had connections.

"Wow..... Is it yours ?" She asked.

"Yes, just been delivered." He said. "One of the perks of the job."

He'd let her own mind fill in the blanks. Amoe would obviously conclude that the bike was a reward from someone in charge, maybe even the president. The bike shone, his own garage team had given the CCST a thorough clean and lovingly polished every bit of chrome.

"Run me home on it." Said Amoe.

Roland would be angry at him skipping paperwork again, but he couldn't resist trying the bike out and there were some nice winding lanes near her parent's house.

“Fine.” He said. “Grab a crash helmet off the rack.....make sure it’s not too grubby inside.”

While she was checking helmets for size and cleanliness, Roland called.

“Do you know a Sofia ?” He asked.

“Yes, my cleaner’s daughter. Why ?”

Roland was playing back a recording of a message and Bradford clearly heard Sofia’s voice.

“Came in a while back.” Said Roland. “It was missed in all the excitement. She left a message for you to contact her.”

“Play it back to me Roland, let me hear her message.”

Roland muttered and banged about a bit, but a few seconds later he could hear Sofia’s voice and the fear in it.

“Bradford. Mama needs to see you urgently. Please come to our apartment right away.”

It was a trap and he’d been expecting it. Too many loose ends and Bradford was the biggest. Mike Lakey knew that Bradford had Gillian and that they’d never stop looking for him. He might have even tried to access a Cherish vault and been turned away. Mike Lakey had a lot of scores to settle with him.

“A minor family problem with my cleaner.” He told Amoe. “I’ll need to go, but I can get a driver to take you home.”

She stared at her shoes for a few seconds, turning her toes inwards and looking awkward.

“I’ll get a cab home, to my place.” She said. “Will you come over tonight, when you’re able to ?”

He held her for a while, wondering just how bad the conversation with her father had been.

“Of course I will. I love you.”

Their goodbye took fifteen minutes, but he hadn’t wanted to hurry her. Bradford started his new bike and liked the way the steady pulse of the hydrogen cell engine, echoed round the garage.

Mike’s people had never seen him on the CCST, that gave him an extra edge. Plus he really wanted to push the powerful machine through the San Pablo traffic.

“Roland, I’m off home..... domestic problem with the cleaner.... I’ll be in at eight in the morning.”

He had over three hundred people to call on, all armed with the best weapons, thanks to Bobby. Yet he wanted to walk into the trap alone. The strange sense of wellbeing descended on him, the one he always had when going into combat. It was what he lived for, what he’d been augmented for.

‘Authorisation required.’ His bike informed him.

The voice was masculine and rather nasal, he’d have the mechanics use the voice chip from his old bike. He ran his PD489 ID over the card reader and he had access to all the local maps and services of the cops and military. His bike was ready and so was he. Bradford drove up the ramp from the garage and out onto the street.

He might well die that night, but he felt resigned to that. He’d always been resigned to dying in the line of duty. Enjoying the fight was the thing and he was really excited about what might be waiting for him.

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