

Bradford

Chapter 14 – Twenty East

“A bullet, a fucking old fashioned 38 by the look of the hole.” He moaned. “They carry the bullets in their grubby pockets for years. Jeez my leg will be infected to fuck !”

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Amoe crept along the corridor, trying to keep to the edges, hopefully avoiding any loose floorboards. She was still psyched up, still holding the knife in front of her, ready to use it on anyone who got in her way. The lamp throws a shadow into a room at the end of the corridor and she hears a man cough.

“I hope you didn’t hurt her ?” He asks. “Hurt her badly and we’re both dead. You know that, right ?” She moves quicker now, not worrying about the noises coming from the rotting boards. She can’t answer him, which she knows will cause him to become cautious. He’s at the door, looking angry, not really looking at her.... at first.

“If you’ve damaged her, I’ll.....”

She’s too far away to use the blade and he pulls a blaster from a holster on his belt. He’s still looking confused, but aiming the blaster at her face.

“Where’s Debra ? The girl, what did you do to her ?” He asks.

She wiggles the blood soaked knife around in her fingers.

“Dead.” She says.

“Shit ! Drop the blade Amoe.”

“No.”

He moves towards her and she takes a swipe at his arm. He jumps back, but doesn’t use the blaster.

“Hurt me and you’re dead. I heard you.” She said. “Come near me and I’ll cut you, cut you deep, maybe cut you dead, like Debra.”

The voice was hers, but the words weren’t. Amoe had heard a lot of gang members talking in the cells, trying to impress the pretty young lady cop. She used it all, trying to seem far more self-assured than she felt.

“Is she really dead ?” He asks. “She had a kid.”

Amoe nodded at him several time.

“Let me go.” She said. “I’ll be vague and emotional when I talk to the cops, I can be good at vague and emotional. I’ll tell them I managed to escape, but never saw any faces and didn’t know where I was being held.”

He still aimed the blaster at her face, but she could see he was thinking. He might have agreed, but there was the sound of a scuffle from the corridor which led to the front of the building. He looked nervous now, put his finger back on the trigger.

“What’s going on ?” He shouted. “Is that you Todd ?”

So, Todd was the young guy. Discipline was falling apart, he should never have let her know any names. Debra, Todd and the descriptions she could give the cops.... They’d be arrested or killed within hours. There’s no answer from Todd and he’s looking nervous.

“Fucking skulls.” He said. “I knew we should have killed them.”

There are sounds from the far end of the corridor and then a voice calling.

“You don’t want to hurt her mister, Bobby will be really pissed off.”

The middle aged guy is scared now, she can see it in his eyes. It's all gone tits up and he's not feeling in control, his eyes are looking from her to the corridor and back again.

"Who the fuck is Bobby?" He asks her.

She honestly has no idea, so she shrugs at him.

"Don't just fucking shrug at me! Are they your friends?"

"I honestly don't know anyone called Bobby."

The voice calls again.

"Just drop the blaster and you can go home mister."

"Where's my guy?" He shouts back.

"Young guy, red jacket..... sorry mister, he isn't going home."

The middle aged guy decides to fight it out, ignoring her and firing several shots along the corridor.

There is just one shot in reply and it takes off the top of his head. He falls forward, his heart still pumping, spewing his blood over the floor.

"The rest of you can still go home. Drop your blasters."

"They're all dead!" Amoe shouts. "All of them, all dead."

"And your name is Miss?"

"Amoe, I'm Amoe Lee."

The sound of footsteps and three men are in front of her, all holding blasters, which they quickly put away. The contrast in size astonishes Amoe. One of them is a smartly dressed guy, barely five foot six. He smiles at her and then walks past her to check out the room where Debra's body is laid on the bug infested blankets. The guy who checks the middle aged guy is huge, like a World Wrestling superstar, given a smart suit and a tie. He smiles at her and pockets the dead guy's blaster.

"Hey lady, don't stick me with that thing." He says.

She still has the blood soaked blade, held up in front of her.

"Sorry." She says.

"Go and help Tony, Little Vic."

Little Vic fills the corridor, as he goes to help Tony do whatever it is he has to do, with poor dead Debra. The guy left is about six foot tall and slim. He's wearing a very expensive suit, probably as good as her father wears, maybe as good as President Herbert wears. He's grinning at her.

"Hi Amoe, I'm Bobby Laszlo, Bradford sent me to find you."

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Maria went through the door first; Bradford ducked and fired back at the mercenary trying to kill them. He still had no idea who the men in black clothing were, but they all seemed well trained and determined to protect Lakey Island. He heard Maria shouting at someone, but he had to concentrate on surviving and killing the man trying to kill him.

"Drop it bitch, or I shoot." He heard Maria shouting.

The noise of battle was also getting closer, he didn't have time to spend too long over the mercenary. At such times, Bradford knew no fear, it was as if a switch was pulled in his mind.

Attacking six subversives in the old bunkers, scaling the wall of the Cherish Vault, all done without any worry of personal survival, without any concern for his own mortality. Something had been done to him, he knew that now. He'd use the gift though, until he had a chance to find who'd altered him and either give them his thanks, or a slow death, he wasn't sure which yet.

Bradford ran at the man dressed in black, probably the last thing he expected. Instead of his blaster, he used a blade, to cut the mercenaries throat and leave him dead on the ground. No time to loose,

Bradford turned and ran back towards the Fabrication Workshop, ignoring the sound of soldiers only a few corridors away. Through the doors and Maria was aiming her blaster at Gillian.

"No Maria !" He shouts. "It's Gillian. No !"

"Tell her to put the syringe down, or I'm firing." Answered Maria.

Bradford remembered the dead Lakey guard, as he looked at the syringe Gillian was holding. It was tiny, the sort he'd been given injections with as a kid, but she held it up, like a dagger. So much death in just a few CCs of light green fluid. Bradford tried to sound calm, even if he didn't feel it.

"Put the pathogen down Gillian, we're here to rescue you."

Gillian didn't look ready to put anything down, there was a look of terror in her eyes and she kept looking towards the door.

"Gillian it's me, you gave me instructions to find you, to save you."

Recognition in her eyes now and Gillian is lowering the syringe, placing it on the workbench.

"Is he dead ?" She asks. "The man I used it on, he should be just down the corridor."

"He's dead." He answered. "Reduced to liquefied flesh."

"I wasn't sure. It's the version that kills subversives." Said Gillian. "He sent his man to kill me, do you believe that ? No loyalty, no morality, Lakey is an animal."

Maria picked up the syringe and dropped it into a steriliser unit. Gillian was spent now, the adrenaline rush that had kept her alive had run out.

"We need to go Gillian." He said. "The soldiers have orders to kill you on sight."

"Our orders were to kill you." Added Maria. "Bradford is right, we need to run."

Gillian picked up a small shoulder bag and merely nodded at him. She headed for a door on the far side of the workshop and they followed her. An explosion to the north shook the floor beneath them and caused the lights to flicker.

"They're going after Lakey." Said Maria.

Gillian stopped, her hand on the door handle.

"Lakey has gone," she said, "took most of the pathogen and my delivery system with him."

She opened the door and gasped, as the San Pablo trooper pushed her aside to enter the room. He was in the new uniform and body armour of the anti-terror elite troops. Far better Kevlar/carbon fibre mix than the grunts wore and a titanium full face helmet. Every breath he took went through an internal filter system, he was the closest thing to a walking tank that Bradford had ever seen. He carried a powerful hand held mini-gun, which he lowered as he recognised the PD489 agents. Then he recognised Gillian.

"This prisoner is marked for battlefield execution."

His voice passed through a device in the filter, which gave it a slightly mechanical edge. It all added the general shock and awe. He raised the mini-gun and Bradford stepped in front of it, just as the trooper pulled the trigger.

"Bradford !" Shouted Maria.

Five thousand rounds a minute it fired, fed from a pack on the troopers back. He only held the trigger for a few seconds, but hundreds of tiny bullets, flew round Bradford and tore the walls and ceiling to shreds. Desks were destroyed, Gillian's workbench almost cut in half, even a few pot plants were shredded. In the middle of it all, Bradford stood quite still and smiled. He raised his blaster and aimed it at the one weak point on the trooper, the eye slits in the helmet.

"Smart bullets," said Bradford, "won't hurt friendlies. You really needed an old fashioned blaster, like this."

The eye slit was coated in the hardest material it was still possible to see through, but it didn't stop the Ion blaster. The trooper grunted as his brain was cut in half, before crumpling into an expensive heap of now useless technology.

"We're killing our own now ?" Asked Maria.

"Argue morality with me later, we need to get out of here."

He grabbed Gillian's hand, half pulling her to the far end of the corridor.

"Ok, you know this place." He said. "Quickest way out of the complex."

The lights went out and it was flashlights then, following Gillian through a maze of corridors. Some doors had flashing lights above them, indicating that various contagions had been released. It wasn't a place to loiter, so they probably weren't being cautious enough. The man in black clothing was in front of the outer door, the one which would get them out of the Lakey Pharmaceuticals complex. He didn't challenge or threaten, he aimed his blaster straight at Bradford.

"Down ! Get down." Shouted Maria.

There was no cover, it was a plain corridor with concrete walls and no doors apart from the one being guarded by the mercenary with the blaster. Bradford never thought it was his time to die though, he never did. As the man dressed in black, started to pull the trigger, his mind was still frantically looking for a solution, an escape route. Maria flattened herself on top of Gillian, using her body to shield someone she barely knew. As Bradford's brain finally decided there was no clever way to escape, their enemy was blown apart.

It started as a glow behind him, as if he was being lit up by a spotlight and within a second the mercenary was an exploding mass of uniform, body tissue and blood. Lots of blood, it coated them, the walls and dripped from the ceiling. Then there was movement, someone walking through the outer doorway, or to be more accurate limping through the doorway.

"It's Gupta !" Said Maria.

He looked an unlikely hero, to be honest he looked quite unwell. Gupta dropped the still smoking outer shell of the single shot rocket launcher and limped slowly towards them. He seemed to have difficulty moving his neck, but he managed to fix Bradford with a huge grin.

"I knew you guys were up to something," he said, "when I heard you were headed away from Lakey's part of the complex."

"Jeeeee Gupta, you look worse than we do." Said Bradford.

"Thanks for saving our asses." Added Maria.

He tried to bow to her, but nearly overbalanced. Bradford helped Gillian up and they followed Gupta out of the rear door. Their stealth VTOL was only fifty yards away, its motors running, ready to leave.

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Bobby Laszlo had never considered himself to be hero material, never, not even once. True Bradford was a good customer who now held a position with some power and influence, but Bobby never did freebies, especially dangerous ones. It had been two years since the last turf war with someone trying to edge into his territory and even then, Little Vic and Tony had done the heavy lifting. It had to happen every now and then, someone's blood had to stain the carpet, it put people in their place, reinforced Bobby's place in the grand scheme of things. Never him doing the bloodletting though, it had been years since he'd personally put a rival in the morgue.

"Fucking skulls." Said Little Vic. "They pick now to get brave."

"Look at my limo !!" Shouted Bobby.

His beloved hybrid limousine was in flames and he'd really loved that car. It had cost a fortune.

Shipped in especially from San Sebastian, the air freight costs alone were staggering. Hydrogen cell

powered, with high powered battery backup. It would cruise at seventy all day, if you could find a gap in the San Pablo traffic. Now a skull had blown it up with some kind of thermal device and someone needed to suffer.

"There are a lot of them." Said Tony.

Something had pissed off the skulls, maybe there had been one too many group of armed guys in their territory? Whatever the cause, there were a lot of them, all armed.

"I have the key card to their car." Said Amoe. "A red car, maybe that one over there."

There was a row of cars about fifty yards away, a dirty and dented red family saloon in the middle of them.

"Are you sure?" Asked Bobby. "That's a long way to end up next to locked car and fifty angry skulls behind us."

"I saw it before they drugged me, but only in the dark. Looks the same car, but I can't be certain." Said Amoe.

They were pinned down in the building entrance, the skulls sending the occasional burst of blaster fire their way and a few old fashioned bullets. Luckily the building was old, the builders had taken pride in their work. The entrance was lined with stone and nothing was penetrating it. Bullets, blaster fire, the worst any of it did was break off the occasional stone chip.

"We can't just sit here." Said Bobby, "The cops here aren't exactly the bravest, but even they can't ignore a live firefight on the streets."

Eventually San Pablo's finest would turn up and that was bad news for all sorts of reasons. The last time the cops had arrested him, it had cost a lot of money to have the problem disappear. The day was already expensive enough, with the loss of his limo. He looked at Little Vic and Tony, they were obviously waiting for orders. They trusted him, everyone knew that Bobby had a reputation for not getting his guys killed.

"Ok, we'll try the car." He said. "You two make sure the skulls keep their heads down and I'll run for the car, covering the girl."

He looked hard at his guys, they respected a bit of mild intimidation.

"It's all about keeping Amoe safe, understand?"

"Yeah, we got it boss."

He grabbed Amoe's hand, holding it tight.

"Keep me between you and the skulls as we run." He said. "If I go down, use me for cover and my guys will look after you. Got it?"

"Yes."

She had the key card in her other hand and she didn't look scared. That was good, he didn't need to worry about her getting into a blind panic when the firing started. Personally, he thought they had a fifty-fifty chance of making it, but he wasn't going to tell her that.

"Do it!" He said.

Little Vic and Tony were good, it was why he paid them more than he paid his accountant. They laid down suppressing fire that even the devil would have avoided. The skulls were hiding behind their own cars, which quickly became burning wrecks. Bobby watched them scatter, at least two falling, probably to never rise again.

"Now we run." He said to Amoe.

Bobby loved the old movie scene with Butch and Sundance, but he tried not to think of it as they left the doorway and ran for the red car. Fifty yards away he thought, just a few seconds to get to it.

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Shereen was probably one of the few people employed by Mike Lakey, who didn't think he was a madman. She took all his dictation, connected all his calls, handled his diary and carried out the duties that any PA to a CEO performs. She was also having sex with him, but that seemed just another part of the job. Mike was going through some kind of midlife crisis; every small jibe about his age was causing him to get far too angry. His wife was to blame of course, but Mike seemed to find it impossible to leave her. Not that Shereen wanted him to, she was quite happy to suck his cock after lunch and then have him go home to Lacey, his ex-model trophy wife. The pilot of their small plane turned and spoke to Mike.

"Next transfer in fifteen minutes Mike."

They'd already changed their method of transport four times since leaving Lakey Island, though it had felt more like running away than simply leaving. A friend of Mike's, an army general no less, had called him, suggested it was time for him to put a few miles between himself and his island complex. They'd gone from plane to boat, then back to another plane and now they were in a small island hopper. The sun had started on their right and now it was on their left, they were heading back towards San Pablo.

"Stop pouting." Mike told her. "We can buy you as many new clothes as you want, just be patient." It was alright for him, he'd had a small case packed and ready. All she had was the clothes she was wearing and her shoulder bag. The bastard had even searched her bag and thrown her phone into the sea.

"I'll buy you a new one." Mike had told her.

"Mike ! My friend's numbers, my family....."

He'd merely shrugged and bundled her onto the plane, with just him, three of his guys and a pilot. Shereen had wondered about the knowledge in her head and why Mike was so keen to get her off his private island. Was she going to be thrown out of the plane over deep water ? Obviously not, he'd even become gentler with every change of transport. Maybe he did love her as he'd often said, maybe being bent over his desk every day at three pm was finally paying off.

"Last change to another plane." He told her. "Then we'll be back in San Pablo."

He had the carry case for the pathogen on the floor next to him, while one of his men carried the delivery device. Mike had always had a large black man as his personal body guard, called him Miguel, though he didn't look like a Miguel. Now she saw faces she barely recognised, maybe Mike was starting afresh, clearing out anyone who might betray him. Shereen was obviously pleased that he hadn't replaced her with a new PA, though she was still worried that he might.

"Where are we going ?" She asked, not for the first time.

He smiled now, even held her hand. Mike obviously felt safe and able to relax.

"I have a house under an assumed name." He told her. "In the better part of San Pablo. You can go shopping, while I arrange a little surprise for President Herbert."

They were landing, on a small island that looked barely large enough. Their small plane bounced over the sand, swinging round and drifting sideways for a few yards. It was a little scary, but Shereen was still glad to be away from Lakey Island. Watching the kitchen helper being beaten to death had changed her, it was the kind of thing that would change anyone.

"Push it into the ocean." Said Mike. "Come on I mean it ! The next plane needs somewhere to land." Even Shereen helped push the expensive aircraft into the surf, watching as it was gradually swallowed by the ocean. It took about ten minutes to completely vanish. Mike was saying little to his men, only Shereen still seemed to be in favour.

"The next plane might take a while to arrive." He said to her. "We'll shelter under the palms."

“Bring the cool box.” He barked at one of his men.

He still had the cryogenic carry case with him, carrying it everywhere with him. He placed it against the trunk of a palm tree and looked up, making sure that no fruit was likely to drop on them. There had been an urban myth about hundreds of people being killed by falling coconuts and Mike obviously still took it seriously. She took a can of fizzy orange drink from him, loving the feel of the cold can on her skin.

“What is this surprise you’re arranging for the president ?” She asked.

Mike didn’t answer her, he called over Nick, who she’d seen a few times in San Pablo and who seemed to be the new version of Miguel. Mike whispered to him and then, much to her surprise, he answered her question.

“Not just Herbert.” He said. “A surprise for this Bradford, who seems determined to be a major annoyance. Bradford corrupting Gillian, Bradford raiding my Cherish vault, Bradford leading an assault on my island.”

He was fuming; she could see his hands shaking, not with fear, but with rage. Nick shot the pilot and the other two guys, shot them as though it was a bit of target practice. Shereen wanted to run, but they were on a ridge of sand that barely deserved to be called an island. Mike held her hand and kissed her forehead.

“Sorry about that.” He said. “But there can be no loose ends.”

She was alive ! By the sound of it she was going to be staying alive. Shereen decided to chance her luck a bit.

“So, you’re arranging a surprise for this Bradford guy ?” She asked.

Again, he didn’t answer her right away. Mike was watching Nick, as he tried to hide three bodies under the island’s only other palm.

“Bury them if you have to.” Shouted Mike. “The incoming pilot mustn’t see them. It might make him a little nervous.”

He looked at her again and Shereen tried to ignore the recent deaths and enjoy her fizzy drink.

“Yes, Bradford is in for a big surprise, right in his own back yard.”

Nick was shouting, the incoming plane was a dot in the distance. Mike picked up the pathogen carry case and Nick carried the delivery device. Shereen picked up the cool box and tried to make herself look useful. Looking useful seemed essential for her survival.

The plane was another tiny island hopper, which had trouble landing and ran a few feet into the sea. The pilot turned the aircraft, aiming back the way he’d come from. The pilot leapt out and opened the passenger doors, almost bowing to Mike, he had that effect on people.

“I thought there’d be more of you.” Said the pilot.

Mike ignored him and sat in the back of the plane, Shereen next to him. Nick sat next to the pilot and then their plane was hurtling towards the far end of the island. It lifted above the waves just in time and flew around in a large circle, before heading towards San Pablo. Shereen had lots of questions in her head, but she remembered the three dead bodies they were leaving behind and kept quiet. She didn’t want to fall into the loose end category.

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Amoe had picked the right car, the key card opened it and now she was sat in the driving seat and driving the car hard. She’d had a ‘defensive driving’ course, all cops went through it in their first year. She wanted the vehicle to be facing the opposite way in a narrow(ish) street, it was what handbrakes were invented for. She doubted if anyone had ever spun the wheels of the elderly family

saloon before, but Amoe managed it. Bobby was sat in the passenger seat, pushing half his shirt into a bullet hole in his calf.

"Keep the pressure on the wound constant." She said.

Amoe had his blaster now and she knew how to use it. She saw a skull fall from the roof of a wrecked car, her fire had burnt a hole through his neck. She jammed on the brakes, bouncing poor Bobby around on his seat.

"A bullet, a fucking old fashioned 38 by the look of the hole." He moaned. "They carry the bullets in their grubby pockets for years. Jeeez my leg will be infected to fuck !"

"At least it went right through." She said.

She was getting to like Bobby Laszlo, his first thought, after moaning about the hole in his leg, was to make sure they picked up his guys. Amoe stopped the car as close as she could to where Little Vic and Tiny were hiding, crouched behind a burning truck. The street looked like a war zone, the cops had to turn up soon.

"Get in the back !" She shouted.

She fired her blaster in a wild pattern of shots, hoping to make the skulls keep their heads down. More by luck than judgement, she hit a skull in the chest and he was a screamer. That put his friends off and they were running away.

"Thanks lady." Said Little Vic.

Bobby's huge henchman climbed into the back seat and Tony crammed himself into the space that was left. Reverse now, Amoe moved the gears to reverse and floored the accelerator. The car wasn't exactly a dragster, but it left burnt rubber on the road and every warning light came on. Amoe ignored it all, spinning the ancient electric car and driving it hard to get completely away from skull territory. She saw Little Vic nodding at her in the rear view mirror.

"Impressive." He said.

"Yeah, yeah." Said Bobby. "I'll employ her as my wheel girl. Now let's get back to my place, I know a doc who'll get me stitched up."

He didn't seem very gracious, considering she'd just rescued her rescue party. She slowed down the instant she heard the cop sirens, becoming just another respectable old red saloon. Another two blocks and they saw a line of cop vehicles going the other way. Three cars and a light APC, the Twenty East cops meant business.

"A bit late, but A for effort guys." Laughed Bobby.

"Where to ?" She asked. "I'll drop you off and go home, my parents must be going crazy."

"Not a good idea." Said Bobby. "Bradford told me to take you back to my place and look after you, until her gets back from his mission."

"Why ?" She asked.

"He thought there might be a connection between his mission and your kidnap."

"Makes sense Lady." Added Tony.

It did, she knew the kidnapers weren't after money, she'd be dead by now if they'd followed the usual kidnap for money formula. She didn't like scaring her parents, but it wouldn't be for long and she trusted Bradford. Amoe picked up Bobby's blaster from her lap and gave it back to him. It was almost a symbolic act, to show trust.

"Ok, but what is this mission he's on ?" She asked.

Another two cop APCs went past. It looked like Twenty East were asking for help from other areas. If nothing else, it would thin out the skulls and make the district safer, for a while. Bobby was looking a bit awkward, the first time she'd seen him lost for words.

"I don't know what the mission is." He said. "Bradford never said, but they needed enough equipment to equip a small army."

She owed him her life, but she had to ask;

"And you know Bradford, how exactly?"

Little Vic actually started laughing.

"I..... procure items for him, this is the first time I've helped him out with matters like this." Said Bobby.

A crook and a fence, she'd guessed as much. Still, if Bradford had sent him to rescue her, he must respect his abilities.

"Ok Bobby." She said. "We'll do it your way, for now. Where are we going?"

"The Dunes Hotel."

No one was laughing, they weren't even smirking at one another.

"You're kidding?"

"No, honest lady." Said Tony.

"I'll show you which lane to use when we get to the car park." Added Bobby.

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Bradford made sure the VTOL was full before they headed back towards San Pablo. Soldiers, civilian consultants, even a few reservists who shouldn't even have been there. The craft was packed, which made it easier to hide Gillian right in the middle of them. A PD489 coverall, a helmet and some dirt rubbed over her face and Gillian was just another soldier on the way home. The mission had been a complete failure, he didn't need a debrief and pages of statistics to tell him. He'd seen a lot of bodies, some of them PD489 operatives. All the casualties would have been acceptable, if they'd found Lakey and whatever he was using as a delivery device for the pathogen. They hadn't and Bradford knew that President Herbert would throw him to the wolves. After all, it was Bradford who had asked for the mission to be delayed for two days. Two extra days for Lakey to plan his escape. At least Roland had good news for him;

"Bobby found the package you sent him to look for." Said Roland. "Safe and waiting for you at his place."

Bobby indeed, no second name, no calling him a fence. Bradford concluded that Roland and Bobby Laszlo were building some kind of rapport and he wasn't sure if that was a good thing.

"Great news Roland, thank you. Did you get a chance to talk to him about the other matter?"

A few seconds of silence and he could hear Roland fending off several calls from the military.

Bradford knew he'd have to make a quick exit once they landed, he wasn't ruling out being arrested and facing a court martial.

"Sorry Bradford, as you can probably imagine, it's chaos here." Said Roland. "Yes, Bobby and I have made a few arrangements and he can provide the special item you wanted."

"Brilliant, thanks Roland."

"I probably don't need to tell you that a lot of people are very keen to see you when you return, including the president."

Bradford watched a medic giving a young female soldier pain killers, she couldn't have been older than twenty. He wasn't surprised that the president was after his blood.

"How many did we lose Roland?" He asked. "Ball park figure will do."

He heard Roland thumping his fingers over his tablet.

"PD489 did well actually, just two fatalities. The San Pablo military lost over twenty and they have a lot of wounded with 80% burns."

Bradford wanted to say so much, but he had to be the boss, had to show Roland that he was still in control.

“Thank you Roland, I’ll be in touch when we land.”

“Keep your head down Bradford.”

There must have been calls coming in for him, but Roland was obviously screening them all and making excuses. Bradford sat next to Gillian and knew that once they landed, there’d be no avoiding a lot of awkward questions.

“Tell me everything Gillian.” He said. “We may not get another chance to talk in peace. Where might Lakey go, what does the delivery device look like. I need every idea in your head.”

Gillian looked terrible, that had been the idea. The helmet rested on her head at an odd angle and a bit of blood was mixed in with the dirt on her face. Her eyes though, they looked terrible and that was nothing to do with cosmetic changes.

“He’s not just mad Bradford.” She said. “He still has a plan to become some kind of dictator, ruling all of San Pablo.”

“Who is he working for?” He asked.

“One of the new nations, looking to gain from instability in the region. San Sebastian, New Borongan, your guess is as good as mine. Only he knew and probably that vacuous PA of his, Shereen.”

For someone who normally had little curiosity, it didn’t make sense to Bradford. He could see one of the new nations wanting to gain control of San Pablo, but Lakey would need someone to report to, someone local.

“So, what does the delivery device look like?” He asked.

Gillian wanted to talk, much of it going over his head. She described the device in great detail, including her addition of a detonator that most sniffer dogs could spot. He listened for an hour and took most of it in, occasionally letting Gillian pause for a drink. Eventually the pilot interrupted her flow, announcing an unscheduled stop for a new fuel cell to be fitted.

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Camila no longer worried about Sofia. She’d bought her daughter a phone and she seemed to spend twenty four hours a day sending messages to Esteban. No more late night trips to a tryst under the expressway ramp, they now met in her room..... with the door left open of course.

A quick call from Bradford and two places had mysteriously opened up at the local school. It wasn’t ideal, Sofia and Mateo would be in the same class, despite their age difference. They’d be taught the basics though and there was the net for everything else. They were due to start there in a few weeks, at the start of the autumn term.

Camila had decided to become what had only been a cover, she’d become a cleaner. Most people paid her in cash and after doing a good job for Emily, a few recommendations had brought in more work. It was honest work and Camila quite liked rising at dawn. Mateo opened his eyes as she checked on them.

“Go back to sleep.” Said Camila. “I’ll be back before you need to get up.”

She liked the early morning, when the air was cool and smelled clean. Camila was getting to know the other early risers and always waved at anyone she recognised. Emily always seemed to get the early shift at the hospital, so Camila cleaned her place first, before getting the kids up and fed. A scarf over her hair, a pair of old jeans and a floppy blouse and Camilla looked just like any one of a thousand other cleaners in San Pablo. She could get to Emily’s by using the lifts, but when the weather was nice, she walked across two car parks and up the emergency stairs.

"Dios mío!"

Camila reverted to Spanish out of shock, muttering 'Oh My God,' to herself. In the car park was a van and three men were fiddling with something in the back. They were all dressed identically, but she knew one of them was their boss, he was one of the richest men in San Pablo. She'd seen him once, when she'd been living with Samuel. He'd arrived with several armed guards and talked to Samuel in a manner no one else would dare. When he'd left she'd asked Samuel who the stranger was.

"The devil Camila, the devil himself." He'd answered.

She knew him now though, recognised the face that seemed to be constantly in the media. If only she'd remembered sooner, but she would let Bradford know now. To stop walking would have made them curious, so she carried on to the other side of the car park and used the stairs to walk up to Emily's floor. She had a phone number for him now, though he had warned it that it was always left to just take messages.

"Bradford, it's Camila. Sorry..... sorry if it has caused a problem..... I know him, Samuel's boss, it must be his boss...."

Her heart was beating fast and she knew she had to calm down and get the words out.

"You know him Bradford, you have his picture in your home. Third from the left on the shelf behind your data terminal."

She looked over her shoulder to make sure they hadn't followed her.

"He's here Bradford..... in our car park !"

~ ~

Bradford wanted to know why a state of the art hybrid VTOL needed a fuel stop. It's range was supposed to be in excess of seven days in the air, he'd been told that by the president himself. Before he could get to the cockpit, Maria was in front of him and handing him her personal phone.

"It's Roland," she said, "he sounds upset."

"I don't want details Bradford, but I'm sure you had a good reason to shoot that trooper." Said Roland. "The trouble is that his camera was running and they've just seen the footage. The military Bradford, you're to be arrested the moment you land."

Shit, he hadn't thought that the guy in the tank suit might have a camera, but he should have.

"So, that's why we're having a fuel stop?"

"No, your pilot is a decent guy, prefers taking PD489 around, rather than the usual crowd of weekend warriors." Answered Roland. "The fuel stop was my idea, all I can do to help you Bradford..... You'll need to get off the VTOL and run."

"I keep saying this today and I mean it..... thank you."

He leant towards Maria and whispered to her.

"Remember the trooper with the titanium helmet?" He asked.

"Yes."

"He had a camera running."

He felt her tense, but couldn't see her face.

"I'll need to get off at the fuel stop; I'm taking Gillian with me."

He pulled back so that he could see her face.

"Are you coming with me?"

"Of course I am."

Before sitting down he looked at his own phone and saw just two messages from Kealani Lee. He'd expected dozens and assumed Lee had given up on him fairly quickly, they never had connected, on any level. All they had in common was loving Amoe. A message with a simple smiley face from Bobby

and then a long message from Camila. Bradford listened to the message and didn't quite make it to the toilet. He threw up in a corner of the aircraft.

"Fuck..... I'm a fool, it's him, the bastard."

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