

Bradford

Chapter 10 – Cherish Vault C

“In other words.” Said Gupta. “I speak fluent Bradford.”

⊖

They were heroes and that was a potential problem. The media were determined to get pictures of the heroic security service officers. The two officers who had rescued a religious party, who'd decided to visit the police academy and have a picnic in the famous scenic gardens. The picnic party had told the story about how a man and a woman had come to their aid and rescued them from almost certain death.

“The children would have died if they hadn't helped us.”

Said Monica on just about every news broadcast. Her hair was freshly styled by the makeup department and they'd applied just the right amount of makeup. Monica looked like everyone's much loved grandmother and the media weren't going to let the story go in a hurry. Gone was the whiny attitude, the whole group were full of praises for the two security services personnel. There wasn't even much said about the demise of poor Gerald, their pastor. They'd asked the church outing to forget their names, but Eleanor was only seven and quickly blurted out their names. The media were looking for Bradford and Maria, to make heroes of them, whether they liked it or not.

“It's good and bad.” Said Bill Cottingham.

A military air shuttle had picked them up and brought them back to San Pablo. It was considered not only the quickest way, but also the most discreet. He'd slept a little on the way back, but it was now lunchtime and he felt as though he'd gone days without a proper night's sleep. He'd put in a request to have the media story killed, not expecting Wild Bill to call him.

“In many ways,” Bill continued, “it's just the sort of story the president wants. Heroic team from the security services saves party of religious visitors. It's perfect, if you weren't members of a secret branch of the police force.”

“How is it going to be handled then ?” Asked Bradford.

“Carefully Bradford, very carefully. We're going to say you're members of the new presidential anti-terror task force and that Bradford and Maria aren't your real names. Is Maria there with you ?”

“No Sir, she's in the lab, working through the evidence we found.”

“It's not Sir anymore Bradford, call me Bill.”

“Thank you Bill.”

“There'll be an award in it for both of you.” Added Wild Bill. “Pass that news onto Maria. The media will be told what you're given, but the ceremony itself will be a quiet and private affair.”

Bradford had never cared much for the various awards he'd received as a cop, but he knew that recent military awards had included money, even the odd electric car. It seemed that the general public liked to see their heroes rewarded in a material way.

“If I may ask ? What are we likely to get ?”

“A medal of some kind and some sort of civic title, which you'll never be able to tell anyone about.”

Said Bill. “There will be a cash award, the president will set the amount, but it will be a life changing amount for both of you.”

Bradford was in a bit of a daze as Wild Bill ended the call. Life changing indeed ! Sometimes, near the month end, twenty five dollars would have seemed to be life changing. It was huge news, news that Maria needed to hear. He left his office and took the elevator down to the laboratory, checking his

personal phone for messages. By the time he left the elevator, he was wondering if Gillian had gone insane and what Cherish Vault C was all about. He spoke before looking properly around her lab.

"Something has come up." He said. "Are you busy?"

He should have looked, but he was still in a bit of a daze from Gillian's message. One half of the lab seemed to contain the contents of the late Astrid Cerone's room and the other half of the lab was strewn with the contents of Don Truscott's student digs. Maria had four interns helping her, while she was analysing the samples she'd taken from Astrid's body. Maria was giving him the kind of look that scared him a little.

"Sorry." He said. "Can you spare me a few minutes after lunch?"

She approached him with a speed that made him flinch, before leaning close enough to whisper.

"After lunch?!" She said. "You can buy me lunch and tell me why you're installing lethal anti-burglar devices to guard your apartment, and why you need to buy black market explosives."

He hadn't forgotten his promise to tell her all about his little side line, doing odd jobs for LabSinc4. It was just that so much seemed to be happening at once. He had no idea how Maria would react to some of it, but at least she'd know why he wanted her to go to Cherish Vault C with him.

"Yes, that's perfect." He said. "Do you really need to go through all this crap?" He asked, waving his hand around the room.

"Well.... Not need exactly." She replied. "But someone has to check it all over."

"Yasmine is competent and with the interns.....I was hoping you might join me on a trip out of San Pablo." He said.

He could see he'd caught her interest. Maria might love her lab, but not the tedium of going through bags of personal effects.

"How far out of San Pablo?" She asked.

"Three hours by plane, though we might be gone a couple of days."

She looked so fresh and alert, how did she do that? Bradford felt as though he needed a few caffeine pills, just to get through the afternoon.

"Where Bradford?" She asked. "Three hours by plane, covers a lot of places."

"Scheduled flight Maria, no bouncing about in a military shuttle. We'll fly business class to New Borongan."

She was actually laughing.

"New Borongan, I've always wanted to go." She said. "The great pirate state, you name it and they'll copy it and sell it cheap."

"I'm sure the stories are exaggerated."

"No they're not Bradford. I know a couple of navy guys and New Borongan are into real piracy too, the old time version. They may not get people to walk the plank anymore, but they're responsible for quite a few missing cargo vessels."

He was pleased she was glad to be going, but not by her obvious joy at the general lawlessness of their destination.

"I'll tell you why we're going there, over lunch." He said.

"No you won't."

He was surprised; Maria loved Sticky's almost as much as she loved someone else paying.

"I know you Bradford Scott." She said. "I bet you just sent a short message to Amoe, telling her you were back home. If she was lucky, you might have ended it with a couple of XXs."

"Well, things are busy, she knows that I"

“Don’t you dare say you love her.” She interrupted. “Not if you’re going to simply send her another message, telling her you’re going away again. Get Roland to organise buying the air tickets and I’ll go home to pack a few things. You..... you are going to call Amoe, tell her you need to see her and take her to a cheap hotel, where you’ll spend your lunchtime having sex. Then and only then will you tell her you’re going to New Borongan on business. Are we clear ?”

“Yes of course, you’re right.” He said.

“Jeez Bradford, sometimes I think you don’t deserve that girl.”

Bradford went to leave, but remembered the good news from Wild bill.

“I almost forgot.” He said. “It appears we’re going to get a medal and a monetary reward for rescuing Gerald’s flock.”

“Great news how much ?”

“Wild Bill wasn’t sure, but he said it’ll be a life changing amount.”

“Makes you think Bradford, we almost left them behind.”

“I would have left them, if they hadn’t had kids with them.”

~ ~

Gillian enjoyed her trips to Lakey Island, even if it did mean being around Mike Lakey for much of the day. She wasn’t sure if the small island had ever had another name, everyone called it Lakey Island. Far enough north east of San Pablo to need a plane to get there. Far enough away to have fresh air and no crowds. The staff that ran the place lived in a compound to the west of the island. Gillian and Greg were in the VIP cottages, on the southern tip. She’d been given the morning off; “Get unpacked, acclimatised and be in my office at twelve thirty.” Mike had told her the night before.

Acclimatise indeed; it was one of his jokes. She leant on the guardrail behind her cottage and took in the perfect beach, the perfect swaying palms. For all she knew, her previous life was over and she had nowhere to go. Lakey Island was beautiful, but she couldn’t live there forever.

“Come on ! We’ll be late.” Snapped Greg.

Poor Greg was still unhappy with her. He had his own cottage and there was no need for him to pester her. He obviously still wanted to punish her in some way. Of course, she should have realised Mike would make him leave on the same plane as her. Mike seemed to see everything going on at LabSinc4 and he’d given Greg fifteen minutes notice to get on the small private aircraft. No wonder her head of research was still in a temper. They could have had two days to pack and leave in a civilised manner.

“I didn’t even bring an electric razor and I hate blade razors.”

He said it as an excuse for the plaster on his chin and as another excuse to heap guilt on her. She was his boss, she could have snapped at him and reminded him of that. She did feel guilty though. Greg was brilliant, a far better mind than hers. Yet she’d probably condemned him to a life in a penitentiary, perhaps worse.

“Have you been here before ?” She asked.

“Yes, quite a few times. Are you alright Gillian ? You know I’ve been here before.”

“I’m just a bit tired Greg.”

There was a covered walkway up to the main building, mainly in case it was one of the many days that it rained on Lakey Island. It was warm and dry, so she chose to use the direct route, letting Greg follow her, or not, it was up to him.

“So, what do you think he intends to do next ?” Asked Greg.

Gillian wanted to ignore him and enjoy the walk in peace, but he was fussing about like an ignored toddler.

"I have no idea Greg." She said. "We'll know in a few minutes."

She opened the outer door to the lab building and felt a slightly cooler waft of air. No air conditioning of course, that luxury had gone when fossil fuels had gone, apart from in places like San Pablo City, with its reasonably efficient power supply. Clever designers had used cooling towers and heat exchangers, to keep the building comfortable. Except that quite often it wasn't comfortable. Some days it was just a bit too chilly for her liking and on others it was a little too warm and sticky. Still, it was like paradise compared to most of San Pablo.

"Hello Miss McBride. Go through, Mike is expecting you."

Even the security on the front desk called him Mike, it was one of his things. They walked past his personal gym, then his personal sauna. It often seemed less like a modern bio-research facility and more like a private health club. Shereen came out of her office to greet them.

"Gillian it's been too long. Oh fantastic, you've lost a little weight."

War had been officially declared and she'd only just entered the office.

"Thank you Shereen. Some of us aren't designed for the beach and have to work at it."

She left Shereen pondering that one and walked past her and into Mike's office. He had a disconcerting habit of dressing in sweats when he wasn't meeting clients.

"Gillian, Greg. Good to see you both." Said Mike. "I hope you're settling in nicely?"

He looked a bit flushed and Gillian picked up a slight aroma of hot, sweaty body. She'd heard a rumour that his wife had made a joke about his fitness, so he now exercised for about six hours a day. Gillian often thought a divorce might have been more efficient.

"Hi Mike, the island is beautiful and dry for once." Said Greg.

"I love being here." Added Gillian.

"Good, you may both be here for a while."

Greg had always seemed so tough, but he was fussing again, fiddling with the bottom button on his shirt. What was he going to do? Swim the twenty five miles back to the main island? There were sharks out there and worse things than sharks, since the war.

"Please, sit, get comfortable."

Mike led them to a sofa and three arm chairs, clustered around a coffee table in the corner of the office. Shereen brought coffee and a plate of biscuits, shaking her head slightly, as Gillian picked up two biscuits.

"So, we come to the next step." Said Mike.

"I was wondering where we went from here." Said Greg.

Gillian said nothing, she already had a good idea what Mike was planning. He opened a file on the coffee table and Gillian recognised the outline of the coast of San Pablo. A circle was drawn round an area that was mainly small tourist towns and fishing villages. Sail driven fishing boats mostly and subsistence living.

"We need another test." Said Mike. "Or more accurately a demonstration."

"I feel the same." Said Greg. "Hit the subversives hard, clear the vermin out of San Pablo."

Gillian just waited. Greg didn't understand what was going on, but she did. She was no fool and putting two and two together had led her to a nasty conclusion.

"Not the subversives." Said Mike. "Our client wants to see the pathogen work on the ordinary population and it will show President Herbert that we're serious."

Greg switched from smug agreement to panic in front of her.

"The people, we're attacking the people? The military will destroy us, we'll be dead as soon as they can get the troops here." He said.

Mike simply picked up another biscuit and drank his coffee. He actually seemed angry as he replied to Greg.

"I'm not a complete fool Greg." He said. "As far as San Pablo is concerned, Lakey Pharmaceuticals are still a loyal supplier of bio-enhancements. All communications will come from our client."

"Who is this client?" Asked Gillian.

"For the moment, let's just say a party who wish to increase their influence in the San Pablo area."

"And no doubt paying a large sum of money for that increased influence?" She asked.

She was pushing him and saw the slight twitch begin, over his right eye. Mike Lakey had no loyalty, no patriotism, no sense of belonging anywhere. He just didn't like to be reminded that he was just another mercenary.

"Enough!" He snapped. "You've both been well paid over the years. My agreement with the client is none of your concern."

Gillian began to wonder about the twenty five mile journey to the main island. Maybe a small boat with enough food and water..... Mike brought her out of her day dream.

"Prove yourselves." He said. "We need a better delivery system for the pathogen. Build it and then I may let you know who our client is."

So, he'd only tell them once they'd become full members in his insane scheme. So far in that there was no coming back. Gillian had her own reasons to nod her head and obey Mike, but Greg seemed all too keen to go along with it.

"What do you need from us?" Asked Greg.

"The pathogen begins to go off once it warms up." Said Mike. "The timer begins and after thirty minutes it dies. Very useful if you wish to clear an area of enemies, but it makes a delivery device very difficult."

"It came in a cryogenic carry case." Said Gillian.

"That will do for the next test, but they're very bulky, expensive and unreliable." Answered Mike.

"We need something small and reliable, with a timed charge. Something that will fit in a back pack." She did her best to hide her feelings of revulsion.

"Fine, have you any existing ideas?" She asked.

"A few. We should move to the lab."

Mike led, while Gillian followed, hoping that Bradford would arrive soon. Everything was there in Cherish Vault C. The pathogen, Mike's insane emails, her research. Surely Bradford would have to mount an attack on Lakey Island, or at least send the military.

~

~

Camila borrowed the mop and buckets from Lou, the building manager. She wasn't worried about not seeing Bradford for a while; he'd given her enough money to buy food for months. The rent on the apartment was paid automatically and she knew he was tough.

"The cops used to clean up the mess." Said Lou.

Lou was a cheerful large man, who was obviously the building's main source of gossip. Camila had decided that taking on the role of cleaner, not only helped Bradford; it also strengthened her cover story.

"Disgusting that they leave the blood." She said. "The children play on these walkways."

Lou was checking out her rear as she mopped, which she ignored. Camila didn't want to encourage him, but she didn't want to upset him either. She just carried on mopping and pretended not to notice.

"There was a bad stabbing on the corner of 5th and St James." Lou said. "Terrible fight between the gangs left four dead and blood everywhere, gallons of it. The cops took the bodies and didn't even use a hose on the street. The blood was there for so long, cab drivers were using it as a landmark." He laughed and she joined in, with what was obviously one of his regular stories.

"I think it's as good as it's going to get." She said.

The walkway had a stain where the drug dealer and his friends had died and burned. The concrete would need to be replaced to get rid of the stains and burn marks. She'd cleaned it with bleach though; no one was going to get sick from a stain. The smell had gone too, the odour of cooked flesh.

"The stain will act as a warning to other low lifes." Said Lou.

So, Lou had his suspicions about Bradford's homemade thief deterrent. Not that he seemed concerned. As he said, it would deter other thieves and drug dealers from trying to work the building. She'd bought window cleaner from the local store, but it wasn't touching the baked on soot.

"I've got something that will shift it. I can get it, if you like?" Asked Lou.

"Thanks Lou, that would be great."

He was light on his feet for a big guy, she didn't hear him go, but when she looked up, he was gone. Sofia wasn't far away, playing with her little brother. Once Bradford was back, she'd talk to him about getting them into the local school. A job for her too, he might know someone who'd employ her, without asking too many questions.

~ ~

Bradford almost had an intern deliver a note to Camila. That would go in a log though, might cause a few questions at a later date. He bought new clothes, rather than visiting his apartment, it was easier and he could afford it. Besides.... He was a little worried about how badly his place might have been damaged. He had to concentrate on Samuel and Gillian. Everything else could wait. Camila was tough, she'd be fine.

"This is only my fifth time on a proper airline flight." Said Maria.

"My seventh." Said Bradford.

They were both in the departure lounge, watching their plane being prepared for take-off. Air travel couldn't be abandoned, though some had called it a throwback to the bad old days and wanted it banned. Families no longer used air travel for holidays, or to visit relatives, it was simply too expensive. Commerce needed face to face meetings though, so air travel had become almost solely the preserve of big business and politics. Even short hops to places like New Borongan were rationed by the price, about three months salary for even the well paid and a lifetimes earnings for some.

"Difficult to imagine that thing flying at three hundred miles an hour." Said Maria.

"Safer than driving on the expressway.... If you believe the statistics."

There were still wells producing oil, but it was all needed for things like plastics. Fossil fuels had destroyed the planet and were completely socially unacceptable. Jet engines were now museum exhibits, as were most petrol driven engines. A few had been converted to run on things like methane, but the future belonged to electric power and the hydrogen cell.

'Flight 1704 for New Borongan, now boarding.' Came over the public address.

There was no stress, no frantic looking for the right gate or finding the boarding pass. Thanks to the price, all air travel was effectively first class. There were only four boarding gates at San Pablo airport and they were all easy to find. They gave their names and showed their civilian ID cards and the computers did the rest. A few tenths of a second and their IDs were confirmed, their tickets matched and various no fly lists checked.

“Welcome to ST Air, flight 1704. Nonstop to New Borongan.”

Said the attractive girl on the gate. Did any planes stop anywhere? Bradford had never heard of one that did, probably just something they said at departure gates. The airline had originally been called Steam Punk Air, because of the similarity of the aircraft to an old comic book genre. Much of the population hadn't understood the name and it lacked gravitas. The airline quite quickly changed all its adverts and branding to ST Air and never looked back. They were out on the tarmac and walking towards the passenger stairs.

“Did you take my advice?” Asked Maria.

If ever there was an impossible question to answer. Maria seemed to give him so many instruction, phrased as advice, that he had trouble thinking about what it might have been.

“Hmmm what advice was that?” He asked.

“About Amoe and the hotel room. Did you?”

Bradford smiled at the recent memory; bits of him still seemed to be glowing from their lunchtime fun.

“Yes, seedy hotel in 4 Central, but we had a great time. Thank you, that was a good idea.”

Maria had her foot on the first step, looking up at the huge craft that was to carry them to New Borongan.

“Wow Bradford.” She said. “I know we get to fly on small shuttles, but wow!”

The aircraft was over two hundred feet long, the length gave it stability at speed. It was said the dirigible could fly through a storm without upsetting your lunchtime drinks. It had to be able to, accurate weather forecasting and navigation had gone and wasn't likely to return any time soon. The occasional aircraft was forced to land due to storms, but they could descend and moor almost anywhere. One had vanished during a tropical storm and all two hundred on board had been assumed dead. That kind of accident was rare though, it was even taught in modern history at schools.

“You don't get the idea of size, when they go past at five thousand feet.” Said Bradford.

Two long cigar shaped rigid gas holders formed the bulk of the air craft. They were no longer referred to as airships, that was a term from history. The gas used was hydrogen, but the scientists had found ways to stop it being so explosive and inflammable. The mixture of gasses didn't have quite the same lift as pure hydrogen, but there had never been a serious fire on any ST Air craft. Between the two gas holders was the five storey high body of the craft, the part that held up to two hundred passengers and many tons of freight. The entire craft had to be anchored to the ground by several huge mooring clamps.

“Freight travels cheaper than people.” Said Maria.

“Shush, you'll get us arrested.”

Freight travels cheaper than people was one of the main complaints of the various disparate subversive groups. It was one of the few things that the many groups agreed on. Commerce ruled in the new nations and perishable goods travelled for a fraction of the price of the average air ticket. The subversives claimed it was the government keeping them from traveling, preventing the spread

of new ideas and alternative ideologies. Personally, Bradford thought that twenty million was a big enough population for San Pablo and he didn't want any more arriving.

"Bradford and Maria?" The man in ST Air uniform asked.

"Yes." Answered Maria.

"You've been upgraded to lower deck front. I'll show you to your seats."

"Who upgraded us?" Asked Bradford.

Their new friend looked around, trying to appear conspiratorial and not really pulling it off.

"I'm not supposed to say, but Mr Kealani Lee asked that you be moved to the VIP area."

Amoe's father, of course, his shipments of fruit and vegetables must keep the airline going when there was little passenger traffic. No peering down from between the gas holders for them, the lower two floor had perfect views, through large picture windows. They were shown to the front on the lowest deck, the very best place to view the passing countryside.

"Jeez Bradford! Has Amoe got a brother that I can date?" Asked Maria.

They were given the area where President Herbert himself travelled. Several large and comfortable chairs, set around a long table, covered in bowls of fresh fruit and nibbles. There was even a bottle of the best Pacific Sparking wine, with a card attached. Bradford settled himself in a chair far more comfortable than he'd ever actually owned.

'Bradford,
Have a great flight
Kealani Lee.'

Said the card. As the mooring clamps were released, he filled Maria's glass with the excellent bubbling liquid. He filled his own glass as the huge craft rose gently into the air and the powerful hydrogen cell motors began to turn the propellers that drove the vessel forward.

"I could get used to this." He said.

~ ~

There had been a few delays, due to a headwind and a cab driver who only seemed to know the long, scenic route from the airport. It took five hours from take-off to being at the hotel reception desk in New Borongan, or simply Borongan as the locals called it. Despite travelling in almost decadent opulence, they were both tired and looking forward to a shower. There were only so many sensational views of islands and coral reefs that anyone could be expected to enthuse over.

"Scott and Gonsalves." Said Bradford. "We have rooms booked."

New Borongan was a tourist destination, for those wealthy enough to enjoy such things, which was few. They catered for all tastes and most vices. The hotel entrance lobby had gambling machines and lots of eager young men and women in sparkly clothing. Two had almost come to blows, when it came to carrying their luggage.

"Relax guys, we're here on business." Maria had told them.

It hadn't settled them down, a customer was a customer and girl in a bunny costume had claimed them and arranged for their bags to be sent to their room, once they'd been given a room number.

"Hell of a week." Said the guy behind the desk. "We had a direct marketing convention and now this."

The now this was the broadcast being shown on the screen in the lounge. Bradford couldn't hear the narrative, but the words on the screen were blaming subversives for the attack.

'Fishing village attacked by corrosive gas.'

'No survivors found after horrific terror attack.'

'Death toll may reach two hundred.'

'No one has claimed responsibility.'

It wasn't subversives, it wasn't corrosive gas, it was the same bio-weapon that had been used at Longmont, but now it was killing harmless villagers. It was Mike Lakey and probably Gillian was involved. It was what her message had been about, he was certain of it.

"I'll call Roland once we get to our rooms." He said.

They both had at least two phones each and a PD489 communicator and none of it worked. None of the technology wanted to work at the kind of distance they'd travelled, it was just a fact of life. They were left with the local phones and a very insecure cable link to San Pablo. Maria was looking at her now useless phone.

"Sorry service not found." She said. "They used to be able to talk to anyone on the planet once."

"Yeah, but they did nearly destroy the planet."

"True."

The girl in the bunny costume led them to their rooms, followed by no less than four guys in elf costumes, to carry their small amount of luggage.

"Been here before." Asked the girl.

"No, first time." Replied Maria.

"Oh you'll love it, we do it all. You'll be amazed."

She handed them both a card and obviously expected a tip of some kind. Bradford gave her a twenty dollar San Pablo bank note, which she seemed to find acceptable. Once again they'd been upgraded. Their two adjoining rooms had become a comfortable suite, with two bedrooms a lounge and a decent sized bathroom. Maria was laughing.

"Have you read her card?"

Bradford read the card and it offered a wide variety of adult services to individuals or couples, including bondage, water sports and free supply of sexual stimulants.

"Even oral at no extra cost." Replied Bradford.

"And Amoe let you come here?"

"Yep, and I think we can thank her father for the upgrade."

He was right, Maria found a card in the fruit bowl. Once again it was Kealani Lee who'd made their trip much more comfortable.

"Can I get a full spa treatment on the expenses?" Asked Maria. "I feel shattered."

"Fine, as long as you're ready to go out again late tonight. We're visiting the Cherish building."

She was giving him one of her looks. He had yet to tell her the full details of their trip.

"But they'll be closed at night." She said. "But I'm guessing you know that."

"We're not exactly expected."

Maria gave a long sigh, but she was still smiling.

"So we're going to break into a Cherish building?" She asked. "One of their famously secure and burglar proof vaults."

He nodded at her and she was still smiling.

"Gillian sent me the passcode for the LabSinc4 vault, for when we get in there." He said.

Maria threw herself onto the sofa and pulled Bradford down to sit next to her.

"Right, the plane over was a bit public, but now we're alone." She said. "Tell me everything about Gillian, Labsinc4 and any other shit you've been up to your neck in."

~ ~

Gupta had been in Longmont, he knew it wasn't a corrosive gas attack on the fishing village.

Someone had used the new pathogen on the general public and that scared him. But he kept his

head down and got on with his routine duties. A huge part of those duties seemed to involve helping Yasmine go through bags of people's personal effects. Eleven recent lovers of Astrid Cerone had been rounded up and two of them had been female. All their belongings had been bagged up and put in the store. Gupta had the job of doing the initial sorting through, looking for anything interesting. One thing he had learned, was that students didn't change their underwear, anywhere near often enough. He was up to his elbows in a bag of evil smelling boxer shorts, when he was called over the internal speakers.

"Gupta to the squad leader's office."

He looked towards Yasmine, wondering if she knew why he'd been called. She smiled back at him.

"You'd better go." She said.

He'd expected Yasmine to go back to being indifferent to him, that she'd put their night of sex down to some kind of aberration. But she was being friendly, behaving like a bona fide girlfriend. She'd even kissed his cheek in public !

"They probably have more bags of student underwear." He joked.

He washed his hands before leaving the lab and quickly kissed Yasmine on the lips.

"Don't be long." She said.

Part of Gupta was still waiting for the rejection, for Yasmine to realise it had all been a huge mistake. But as he waited for the elevator, he was happy, genuinely happy. The elevator stopped on the operations level and Schneider joined him.

"Well ?" Asked Schneider.

"Sorry ?"

"Was it good ? Did she go on top and everything ?"

His heart sank. Was their night of passion general knowledge ?

"How do you know ?" Gupta asked. "Does everyone know ?"

Schneider seemed quite friendly, leaning towards him and talking in a whisper.

"If you want to screw in private." He said. "Leave your communicator in the vehicle. They're tracked automatically and yours was logged at Yasmine's address..... all night."

"Shit, shit..... shit !"

"Hey, less of the long face." Said Schneider. "Everyone is impressed. You did well, she has to be a nine, maybe a nine and a half. And you, well....."

They were outside Bradford's office and Gupta never did get to hear Schneider's scoring of his sexual attractiveness. Much to his relief.

"Gupta, Schneider, good." Said Roland.

No one sat in Bradford's chair, they crushed together on the other side, using the uncomfortable metal framed visitor's chairs.

"It's about the mission we discussed Schneider, the hotel on the coast." Said Roland. "We'll need Bradford to agree and Gupta might be useful..... He knows them, he's used to their way of doing things."

"In other words." Said Gupta. "I speak fluent Bradford."

Roland's expression said that he was already regretting inviting a junior trainee to the meeting.

"I've spoken to Bradford once and he'll be calling us in a minute or two." Said Roland. "They don't have long, they have a mission tonight in New Borongan."

A mission in New Borongan, it was all news to Gupta and he was impressed. PD489 only had a remit to operate in San Pablo, they must be onto something really big.

"We have to assume all calls on public lines are being listened to." Added Roland. "So be careful what you say."

They waited, looking at each other awkwardly until the phone rang, which Roland answered. After the initial greeting, Roland put the phone onto hands free.

"I don't have long, just give me the bottom line." Said Bradford.

"How would you like us to handle the new flu outbreak?" Asked Roland.

"Ignore it until I get back. No one will expect us to do anything."

Roland tapped the instructions into his personal tablet.

"There is a development regarding your cousin Sam." Continued Roland. "He's definitely staying at his favourite resort."

The line was bad, they listened to it crackle for a few seconds.

"You're certain?"

"Yes. Your brother Anson said he'll meet him for you. If you want?"

More crackling and Maria's voice, though her words aren't clear.

"Fine, give Anson my thanks and tell him to look after himself. He can take a few friends, including glitter fairy and bullet magnet."

The line went dead and Schneider was grinning at him.

"We're going Samuel hunting." Said Schneider.

~ ~

Bradford was pleased that street fashion always seemed to include a lot of black. A phone call to the number the girl in the bunny suit had given them and they were the proud owners of black jeans, black shirts, black jumpers and a pair of black gloves each.

"It's our thing." Was all the explanation Bradford had given.

No one asked and the guy who delivered them, seemed happy to be paid at least three times the going rate for such clothing.

"I told you." Said Maria. "They'll just assume we have a fetish."

Bradford changed and wondered once again if he was right in letting Schneider go after Samuel.

"I almost hope that Samuel has left the Juniper." He said.

Maria was looking worried too. The decision to go after Samuel had been taken quickly, perhaps too quickly.

"Is that why you sent Yasmine?" She asked. "To go through any forensics he might leave behind."

"No. They need at least one cautious operative on the team."

"If they listen to her."

They left the hotel with no weapons at all, but that was easily remedied. No blasters, that would instantly get them arrested if they were searched by the local cops. Plus Bradford had no idea where they could be bought and it might take all night to find a black market gun dealer. They both entered the seedy looking store and instantly saw what they wanted.

"Look honey, fur lined manacles." Said Maria.

New Borongan really was the place that catered for all pleasures. They bought two bagfuls of sex toys, including two sets of serious looking handcuffs and two knives. And of course a large roll of duct tape. The cashier simply smiled and thanked them for their custom. They stopped in an alley a few streets away and dumped the bulk of their purchases.

"These look as good as the cops in San Pablo use." Said Maria.

She was pulling at the cuffs, testing their strength. Hopefully they wouldn't need them or the knives they'd bought, but it was good to be prepared. There was no San Pablo consulate or embassy in the

New Nation of New Borongan. The world didn't work like that anymore and they had to rely on their own initiative to acquire the kit they needed.

"Jeez Bradford." Said Maria. "What fetish needs a knife like this?"

He looked at the wicked looking blade he now owned which obviously had only one purpose, killing people. He pushed it into its sheaf and fitted that to his belt.

"Dunno, role playing I guess." He said.

It took them half an hour to reach the Cherish Building, or rather the Cherish compound. Right on the edge of town, a small two storey building in the centre of a compound, surrounded by a two metre high walls, topped with clumps of razor wire and lights. They tried their best to keep in the shadows and move closer.

"No sign of motion or heat detectors, just the lights." Said Maria.

The wall and front gate had numerous signs in various languages, all warning of the mayhem that would be inflicted on potential burglars.

"Maybe they rely on the lights and their reputation." Said Bradford.

He didn't even convince himself. They crept closer, finally lying behind the garden wall of a darkened house. After about ten minutes, the compound gates opened and half a dozen well-armed guards emerged. They walked round the perimeter of the compound, carefully examining the wall. It took nearly an hour and then they went back inside.

"They're good." Said Maria.

"Yes, but they aren't going to do that very often."

It was dark, but the compound lights showed the grim expression on Maria's face.

"I know that tone." She said. "No Bradford, no. We have no idea what else they have."

"We've seen what they have Maria, really thorough guards."

He gave her what he hoped was his most appealing grin.

"Not afraid of a bit of razor wire are you?" He asked.

He ran to the base of the wall and waited for her to join him, which she did almost immediately. No muttering at him about getting them killed, she was actually smiling at him.

"See." He whispered. "There's even a gap in the razor wire."

The gap wasn't complete and he felt the wire cut through his jumper and wound his arm. Bradford winced, but he'd had far worse. He helped Maria onto the top of the wall and then they both jumped down on the other side. It was like daylight, flood lighting everywhere and they could see figures moving about in the central building.

"It'll be fine." He said. "We'll just have to be careful."

They moved to side of what was obviously one of the vault entrances. There were about eight of the covered entrances, all lit up like day and all spread around the compound.

"Which one?" Asked Maria

"They just have numbers over the door." He answered. "We want SBC17420."

The outside entrance was obviously just there to keep out the weather and give the customer a little privacy. The vault they were next to had SBC11874 above the simple outer wooden door. Bradford pointed at the next nearest vault, which was a good ten yards away.

"Probably no guards in here." He said.

Never temp fate that way, when would he learn? He had never intended to kill a Cherish guard, they were just guys doing a job. Bradford had hoped that hand cuffs and a little duct tape over the mouth would be the worst he'd have to do. The guard was half inside the outer door to the vault, taking an impromptu smoking break.

“Damn.” Muttered Bradford.

He stabbed the guard in the throat to stop him shouting and pushed him right inside the vault outer shelter. Bradford followed, using the knife twice more, to finish off the guard. There was a small light in there, enough to see that once again they had the wrong vault.

“It’s big in here, we can wait in these outer shelters.” Said Maria.

“I’m hoping the next one, is the right one.” Said Bradford.

It was good to get an idea of the layout though. The outer shelter covered a concrete lined tunnel, which descended at a steep angle. At the bottom was a very solid looking vault door, with a computer screen in its centre, a large handle and a keypad to enter the password.

“All fairly simple.” Said Maria.

“It explains the strange characters in the password Gillian sent me.”

He pointed to the symbols on the keypad that looked like animals. A rabbit on one, a toad on another. They just needed to find the right vault. Bradford took the guard’s blaster off his dead body and a second one he had in his jacket pocket.

“At least we’re properly armed now.” He said.

“He’ll be missed though, eventually.” Said Maria.

They watched for longer this time, trying to give even the most lazy guard, time to finish a smoke. When there were no obvious figures watching from the central building, they swiftly moved to the next vault. The outer door creaked slightly as they opened it, so they quickly moved inside. It was the right vault, the number confirmed it belonged to LabSinc4.

Bradford knew the passcode by heart; he hadn’t wanted to have it written down anywhere, or on any electronic device. He saw the number in his mind and walked towards the vault door.

“They might get a warning when it opens.” Said Maria.

“It can’t be helped.”

He pressed the first number of the passcode, a number 2. Instantly there was a fairly quiet beeping noise and the computer screen came to life, showing the number he’d just entered and a counter. It was counting down in seconds from one minute.

“Welcome to your Cherish Vault.” A robotic sounding voice said. “You have one minute to finish your passcode, to avoid obliteration of your vault.”

Obliteration !! He had no idea what that meant, but he was certain it wouldn’t do them much good, if they were still standing at the vault door. It was ok though, he knew the passcode. Bradford counted to five in his head, calming himself. He felt Maria’s hand on his waist and her warm breath close to his ear.

“No pressure Bradford. But get it fucking right !” She hissed.

~ ~