

## Bradford

### Chapter 8 – Sub Level 4

**“Don’t be alarmed.” Said Bradford. “I’m Bradford and this is Maria and we’re with the military.”**  
**“About fucking time !” Shouted the old lady.**

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Gillian McBride had decided to sleep at the office. It was something she rarely did, but there were a few staff beds, tucked away in various rooms. Sometimes they had tests that ran for days, or sometimes a patient needed round the clock care. There were the rooms used by test subjects, but none of the staff wanted to use those.

“I’ll make up the bed in Security 5, for you.” Said Tamara. “I know where some clean sheets are.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind.” Replied Gillian.

Security 5 was perfect; there were repeater screens for the outside cameras. She could watch the traffic on the expressway if she couldn’t sleep. She’d be there though, on the premises in case Gregory’s team found the marker. They were close, everyone knew it. Several other teams had given up on their ideas to help Greg with his ‘Prison Belly,’ project.

“You’re absolutely certain ?” Mike Lakey had asked her that very afternoon.

“Yes Mike, though to be truthful, I’m as surprised as you are.” She’d replied.

It was insane that a virus seemed to be almost entirely restricted to convicts and subversives. It was so crazy that she’d almost stopped Greg from carrying out the research. Nature just didn’t work like that, but of course the virus might be nothing to do with nature. She called Gregory on his personal communicator.

“I’ll be here all night Greg, in the bed at the back of security. Call me if there are any developments.”

“Tonight is a bit soon Gillian. I think we’ll have the marker isolated by lunchtime tomorrow. I’ll have you woken up if we find anything sooner.”

Gillian picked at the remains of a green salad of some kind, it was the withered lunch she’d bought hours ago. Her mind was on the virus that created flu like symptoms, coupled with digestive problems and joint pains. It had similarities to Norovirus, but was much more virulent and had caused death in quite healthy individuals. Now Gregory had a whole roomful of people, investigating how ‘Prison Belly,’ worked. It had been given a proper designation number, but most of the staff were still calling it prison belly. It had to be manmade, or at least man altered.

“Still here ?” Asked Stefan.

“Yes, I’m sleeping here tonight. Just in case they have the big breakthrough.” She replied.

“Don’t let Lakey know.” Said Stefan. “He’ll call, just as you’re falling asleep.”

“Or going for a pee !”

They both laughed, they knew what a bastard Mike Lakey had been recently. Stefan had once been firmly in team Lakey, but even he’d been bullied and ill-treated lately. Gillian threw the remnants of her salad in the rubbish bin, it really was inedible. She wasn’t tired yet though, so she did what millions of other were doing. Gillian turned on the office screen and watched the media circus over events at the San Pablo Police Academy. She muted the sound, relying on the constant flow of words along the bottom of the screen. It was obvious that the media knew almost nothing, but were using it to fill hours of broadcasts.

‘No explanation of mushroom cloud’

‘President Herbert has denounced the outrage’

'Lone wolf or terror group ? No one seems to know'

'Relatives wait anxiously for any news'

It went on and on, saying nothing. There were a lot of amateur images of the mushroom cloud and trucks going past. Trucks full of heavily armed troops. Gillian knew that Bradford would be at Joyce's Green and up to his neck in it all, she'd have gladly bet her life on it.

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It was dark by the time they were ready to enter the ruins of the library building and Ginger had lent them three young soldiers, all carrying battlefield lighting. They all stared at the hole where the survivors had emerged and it looked very dangerous.

"The DisOps has issued orders." Said a young soldier. "The library rubble will be cleared last. No one is going to bring it down on your heads."

Bradford looked north, the way they were going to try and follow what was left of the tunnels.

"Any heavy plant being used north of here ?" He asked.

The soldier just nodded at him, they all looked so young. The full time army of San Pablo was small, well equipped and very well trained. The bulk of the army though, was made up of reservists and most of them tended to be students. They were all volunteers and officially, there was no pressure to be a reservist. But if you didn't do a few years in the reserves, you were unlikely to get a decent job after finishing college. The problem was, Bradford had heard that their training was minimal.

"Can you hold off clearing rubble ?" Asked Maria. "Just for a day."

"No Mam, the President has ordered us to clear the worst of it in three days. We're doing you a favour, leaving the library until last."

It was no use, Bradford had worked with reservists before. They were young and keen, but they blindly followed orders. They reminded him of himself in many ways, or how he had been until quite recently.

"Would you like one of our lighting rigs ?" Asked the soldier.

"No, they're too heavy to carry where we'll be going." Answered Bradford. "An extra flashlight would be useful though."

"Yeah sure."

The soldier unhooked the light from his belt and gave it to Bradford. It was the latest model and looked unused. The power pack was fully charged of course, the military were good at things like that. Bradford winked at Maria.

"Better than ours. Newer model and looks fresh out of the box." He said.

Maria needed no further encouragement. She put her hand out and one of the other soldiers gave her his light. She wasn't content with that and obtained another one from the third soldier. The lights were lightweight and perfect for the tunnels and the power packs would last for days.

"Ginger said to remind you."

"Yes, about what ?" Said Bradford.

"Find any live ones down there and you need to let him know."

"Yeah, fine." Said Maria.

Bradford led, following the scuff marks and footprints, where the survivors had made their way to the surface. Everything was unstable and they tried to touch nothing. It wasn't a path they were following down, but simply a hole that the rubble hadn't managed to fill. Parts were so steep that they slivered and then they'd go for a hundred yards or more, completely straight and flat. Footprint went off into side passages, but it was always easy to see where the survivors had come from.

"Think of the wrong turns they must have made." Said Maria. "And with no proper lighting."

“Never knowing if they’d ever get to the surface.” He added.

There was no wood or plastic in the rubble. That had all been incinerated in the intense heat. The rubble consisted of stone, concrete and steel and some of the steel had been bent into bizarre shapes.

“Not all of them made it.” Said Bradford.

She’d obviously touched something loose and that had caused something else to move. Eventually the slab of concrete had hit her, almost cutting her in two. Her face looked almost serene, as if pleased to give up the struggle of finding a way out. She looked about forty and too well dressed to be a student. They left her alone and carried on, the footprints taking them down a particularly steep section. Bradford used his left hand to steady himself and something shifted.

“Stay there !” He called back to Maria.

The rubble moved and the concrete above him shifted forward, to be replaced by yet more rubble. The ceiling was now a good foot lower and he was covered in concrete dust, but otherwise unharmed. He looked back at Maria shining his light on her face. She said nothing, but her eyes were screaming at him.

‘For Fuck Sake !’ They were screaming.

He simply nodded at her and went carefully down the slope, often having to slither on his backside. The floor beneath their feet was just more rubble and although it looked firm, that could move too. Everything moved, nothing was solid, it was all unstable. It was the worst kind of place for someone who admitted to having a few control issues. Bradford ignored his inner turmoil and eventually they came to an area with a proper concrete floor.

“There !” Said Maria, shining her light.

There were remnants of some kind of office partitioning and an open manhole cover. Next to the cover were the words ‘S1 – Parking.’ The paint was charred, but the words could still be clearly read. All around them was rubble. Once there had been floors of books, databanks, screens and the research facilities of one of the best libraries on the planet. Now it was rubble.

“Down the rabbit hole.” Said Bradford.

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Gupta had felt a little let down, that Bradford and Maria hadn’t taken him with them. He was their colleague, friend, one of their posse. Yes, Maria often referred to him as their mascot and bullet magnet, but it was always said with affection. They’d had to leave quickly, or so Roland had told him. The call from Roland, to join Schneider and Yasmine hadn’t thrilled him either, until he heard they were going to Bradford’s apartment building. A scene of crime expert and Crazy Schneider, something truly spectacular must have happened to Bradford’s home.

“Yasmine has the keys to his place.” Roland had told him. “Grab a portable sniffer and join them.” Yasmine had told him not to bother with the sniffer. It appeared the police had brought along a couple of dogs to sniff out explosive and everyone knew that dogs did the job better than their technology. Gupta felt a little useless, they didn’t even tease him the way Maria did. He stopped feeling like an outsider, when Yasmine asked;

“Do either of you know the layout of his apartment ?”

“No.” Answered Schneider. “We always seem to end up at Maria’s after going out for a drink. She has a pool.”

“I do.” Said Gupta. “I went there for Bradford to dig a skin bug out of my back.”

It hadn’t been his back, it had been his right arse cheek, but he didn’t see why they had to know that. Yasmine was smiling at him and handing him her data terminal.

“Great.” She said. “Sketch out a quick map, starting at the door.”

She’d obviously decided to be the boss of the mission, he’d heard she was like that. Schneider just ignored them both and checked his weapons and he had quite a few. Gupta drove the vehicle, not an APC, which disappointed him, but an ordinary electric powered saloon. Not even a decent version with a few extras either, it was the same basic model that the cops used.

“It’ll take a while.” He said. “The traffic will be dreadful, it always is. So what’s the story?”

“An explosion outside his flat.” Said Yasmine. “The cops are reporting several casualties. Roland seemed to think they may have been trying to use explosives to break in and something went wrong.”

“Crap !” Exclaimed Schneider.

Yasmine wasn’t used to having her ideas dismissed so crudely, she turned on Schneider. Not that he seemed concerned by her scowling expression.

“I’m sorry. What did you say to me ?” She asked.

“Crap. Bradford will have put a little gift above his door, for anyone trying to break in.”

Yasmine was still looking indignant, but Gupta thought that Schneider was probably right.

“Well, we’ll just have to wait and see won’t we !” She snapped.

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Camila didn’t have to wait and see, she’d seen most of it happen. Her daughter had made a new friend, a boy who lived in the block. He seemed a nice kid and obviously idolised Sofia, he even held her hand. Camila was amused by their young love, but also glad that Sofia was making friends, people who cared about her.

“Some men are outside Bradford’s apartment.” Sofia had told her.

They’d been out on the walkway, doing whatever kids do. Nothing to worry about though, she took Mateo everywhere with her. They’d seen strange men outside Bradford’s door and decided to go for help.

“You two stay here.” She’d told them.

A woman on her own would look like being nosey, but a woman carrying a kid, would look normal. Camila carried Mateo, up in the elevator and along the walkway that ran past Bradford’s apartment.

“There Mama.”

“I see them, be quiet now.”

He was heavy and fidgety, so she put him down, but held on tight to his hand. There were four of them and three of them looked like local gang thugs. The fourth though, the one obviously in charge, she’d seen him a few times. The bastard had tried to sell drugs to Sofia, he was rumoured to be connected to the Dysto-Guerra. The subversives she’d been with, only ever used their own people and never hired in outsiders. Samuel though, she’d heard that he was quite happy to hire in any talent he needed. She was some distance from them, but hoped her voice would reach.

“A cop lives there !” She shouted, hoping it sounded more like a warning than a threat.

He smiled straight at her, the bastard who sold drugs to kids.

“We know lady.”

He didn’t even tell her to piss off. They didn’t care if anyone saw their faces, only a crazy person talked to the cops. Mateo was nervous and whining at her, so she stroked his hair.

“We’ll be going soon.” She said, hoping it sounded soothing.

One of them was looking through the window, there was no way in that way. Every landlord in San Pablo, now fitted superglass, which was virtually indestructible. It was expensive, but it had made

previously unlettable parts of the city, safe again. Bradford took his security seriously and she knew that if by some miracle, they got past the glass, he had the best shutters on the market.

“Quiet child.” She muttered at Mateo, who was whining again.

He knew that the door was the only weak point, the bastard knew. They had a hydraulic ram, the sort she’d seen the emergency services use. They were expensive, the kind of kit which Samuel could buy with his loose change. One of them fired an explosive rivet, to fix the ram to the walkway.

“Don’t look, don’t look.” She muttered, picking him up and cuddling him.

Three more rivets were fired and other tenants came out to see what was happening. Most saw the activity outside the cop’s apartment and went back inside, but some remained.

“I’ll call the cops.” Said Emily, who knew Bradford.

Brave to call the cops, Camila knew they must be good friends. Camila watched as the business end of the ram was placed against the bottom of Bradford’s door. She had a pretty good idea of what was likely to happen next and didn’t want Mateo to see it. She didn’t run, she walked swiftly to the recess where the elevators were and waited.

“Shhhh, nothing to be scared of.”

The explosion had been fairly small, but loud enough to scare an already nervous child. He was a good boy, but not yet old enough to stay where he was told to. She had no alternative than to carry him back with her, keeping his head firmly against her.

“Don’t look, we’ll soon be going home.”

The fireball had gone, there wasn’t even a sign of it in the sky. There was a strange crackling noise and the smell of a badly run BBQ. As if someone had spilt pork fat on the charcoal. She saw the fires and it didn’t register for a few seconds, that it was the bastard burning and his friends. Not just their clothes, they seemed to be burning and looked likely to carry on burning for some time. They were dead, probably killed by the blast. Camila was deeply religious and it seemed right that they should burn. She just hoped they were on their way to hell.

“We’re going now.”

She leant down and kissed the top of his head and he settle down. Bradford’s window had held and his door had only buckled slightly. The device he’d placed above his door and hers, had worked well. He’d assured her;

“It will only be a danger to anyone trying to break in.”

The cops had been called, so she carried her son home. Bradford’s friends in PD489 would make sure his apartment was safe.

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Sub Level 1 was all parking and most of the vehicles had been incinerated by the fireballs. Following the trail of the survivors had been harder, but there will still scuff marks in the soot and the occasional blood stain. The bizarre thing was finding the odd hand or foot, that had been shielded from the heat and remained almost intact. Maria had even discovered half a face, the right eye still bright and looking alive. They were both too battle hardened to be shocked or upset by such things, they were just filed away in his mind as strange occurrences.

“The stairs down.” Said Maria, pointing her torch.

“At last.” He replied.

Sub Level 2 was a mix of parking and storage. Once cars had been a hazard, full of highly combustible fossil fuels. Now most vehicles were battery powered and there was no problem in parking them near to flammable archives and stores. Despite the depth, the heat had penetrated and many of the vehicles were unrecognisable. A hydrogen powered truck had exploded, taking out a supporting

pillar. Unsurprisingly, no one had thought of a massive fireball, when deciding on what could park where.

“Ginger said that no one survived from S2.” Said Maria.

There were bodies that were recognisable as once being people. Scorched beyond being able to tell whether they’d been male or female, but flesh that was people shaped. There was no smell of corruption yet, the heat must have done a pretty good job of cleansing the place of bacteria.

“They seem grouped in places.” Said Maria.

“Probably ran in here, hoping to escape the horror outside.”

Bodies were in mounds near some of the entrances, yet the footprints of the survivors could still be followed. Would the survivors ever truly recover from the things they must have seen ? Bradford wondered if it was right that Maria and himself seemed unaffected. Was it a strength or a weakness ?

“Down again ! Over here Bradford.”

There was a body on the stairs down to Sub Level 3. A man with a terrible stomach wound, so terrible that it was a miracle he’d been able to walk at all. His face was calm and someone had taken the time to close his eyes and straighten him out. They followed his blood, down the stairs and along the main corridor of S3.

‘Sub Level 3 – Data Servers and Medical – Access Restricted.’

Said the sign on the wall. Restricted to who wasn’t mentioned, but Bradford doubted that anyone would care now.

“Don’t get fooled by the word medical.” Said Bradford. “There are two doctors who both live off campus and about half a dozen nurses, who run the academy clinic. Anything more serious than the flu, gets referred to a proper hospital.”

Fire resistant materials were pretty good, just not up to resisting thousands of degrees. The effects were quite bizarre on S3. The heat had obviously struck down various vents and pipes, incinerating offices. Then, just along the corridor, another office would look perfect, as if the person working there had just popped out for lunch. The footprints were less clear now, but there were still enough clues and the trail led through the clinic.

“One of the nurses never made it.” Said Maria.

They’d put her on a bed and connected a drip to her arm, before they’d begun the trip to the surface.

“At least they tried.” Said Bradford.

Half of her body was dreadfully burned and she really had stood no chance. Someone had put her in a robe though and given her a drip of some kind. Maria picked up her ruined uniform, which had been left on the bedside chair.

“Nurse Whitfield.” She said. “Did you know her ?”

“No, they tended to drift in and out on short term assignments from San Pablo General.”

The bodies were fewer, but now they looked like real people. Some had died from blast injuries of various kinds and others were just dead. Bradford turned a young student completely over, finding no sign of injury.

“Blast can cause a vacuum and collapse the lungs.” Said Maria.

There was a definite breeze now, a stream of fresh air that originated in the direction the survivors had come from. There was discarded clothing next to the footprints now and sometimes a briefcase.

‘Main Servers – IT Staff only.’

The doors had a keypad and a secondary lock, but they'd been left open. There was artificial intelligence at work in the IT department. Green lights still winked on backup power, servers tried to send their precious data to mirror servers. Red warning lights flashed, screens showed the most dire of warnings. They ignored it all and followed the breeze and the trail to the doors at the far end of the server room.

'Mixed Services Tunnel – Keep Locked – Danger of Death !'

Despite the sign, the doors had been left wide open and the breeze was coming up from below. Bradford shone his light down the shaft and studied two ladders fixed to the wall. He also carefully touched the pipes in the shaft and they were all cold, or tepid.

"About fifteen feet down to S4." He said. "Pretty bad for the survivors to climb up, but no problem for us."

He swapped packs with her without saying a word, hers was much heavier than his and seemed to hold everything, including the kitchen sink. He held his torch in his left hand and used just his right to steady himself on the ladder. Down he went, arriving in what must have recently been a scene of horror. Maria was quickly stood next to him.

"Jeez Bradford. Do you think they killed those who couldn't climb the ladders?"

"No sign of that. I think they just left them, no choice really."

There were ten or so bodies, all too badly injured to make it up the fifteen feet of ladder to S3. Bradford didn't want to think of the panic of those being left behind. They both checked the bodies for signs of life and it was Maria who found the live one.

"Got one Bradford, though I don't think she'll survive much longer."

He gave Maria her pack and watched as she quickly checked over the young woman.

"Barely a heartbeat." Said Maria. "Eyes unresponsive to light. She's in a coma Bradford and she'll be dead in an hour, but I'll send her details to the weekend warriors upstairs."

Maria ran her camera over the woman's face and sent her details and location to the military server. There was a confirmation receipt and a short message for Bradford, marked as personal and non-urgent. Maria was smiling at him.

"It seems some arseholes tried to break into your flat." She said. "Your flat is fine, but the arseholes are all dead."

Bradford wanted to ask about Camila, but she didn't officially exist. They left the young woman to her fate and went through another set of doors, to enter a clean and relatively tidy part of S4.

"So, what did you use?" Asked Maria. "A Squib."

He ignored her, which he knew was just going to provoke her.

"Come on Bradford, you can trust me. I won't tell."

"I used a shaped charge, the kind of thing they use to cut open steel vaults... I just added a bit of pep to it."

He tried to ignore her shocked look. They had a long way to go through S4 and a lot of obstacles to get round.

"A bit of fucking pep Bradford!" She yelled. "Come on tell all. Did you buy it, make it?"

He stopped and held her, using his hand to wipe her dirty hair out of her eyes. He'd been wanting to do it for hours, but it had seemed inappropriate. He kissed her sooty cheek and it tasted bitter.

"I will tell you Maria. I've been wanting to and when we get out of here, I'll tell you everything. Not now though, we've a job to do."

He let go of her and carried on walking, past door after door of the administration areas of Sub Level 4. He heard her muttering as she ran to catch up.

“You’d better keep your promise to tell me Bradford, or I’ll beat the crap out of you !”

Amoe woke and knew something had disturbed her sleep. Normally she went to bed and the next thing she knew about, was her alarm ringing at around six thirty or so. Her hand was still between her legs, her fingers still against her most sensitive spot.

“Hmmmmm.” She murmured.

She remembered the intimate personal moment that had been so pleasurable. She’d been picturing Bradford, fantasising about him being quite strict with her. Her fingers gently probed again and she felt the wonderful warmth begin. No ! Something had woken her and needed investigating. Amoe removed her hand from between her legs and pulled back the sheet.

“Wake up girl.” She muttered at herself.

The glow from her hallway showed nothing strange or unusual. Her phone, it was glowing blue and needing her attention. Still half asleep, she wondered why someone called Roland was sending her a text message in the middle of the night.

‘Bradford has had to go out of town on urgent business and may not be back for a few days.’

There was a contact number for her to use and a name to ask for, Roland. There was a second message.

‘Don’t go the Bradford’s apartment. There has been an attempted burglary. It is being dealt with by the police.’

Again, from Roland at the same number. Who the fuck was this Roland ?

Amoe was wide awake now, her heart thumping in her chest. She got up and paced the room. It was obvious, Bradford was in some kind of para-military organisation, probably controlled by President Herbert.

“Cops who quit don’t get private chats with the president.” She muttered.

She pulled a gown from a hook on the back of the door and looked in the mirror, making sure she looked decent. Amoe sat on her bed and tried the number for Roland.

“Good morning, San Pablo Sanitation. Can I help you ?”

She hung up. A cheery female voice at..... she still wasn’t sure of the hour, but it had to be something ungodly. Two am her phone said, not as late as she would have guessed, but still a time when no one would be around in the offices of the Sanitation Department.

“What the hell are you up to Bradford ?”

She had to know, just had to. Amoe wasn’t a boat rocker by nature, but she loved Bradford and had to know the truth. Her father would know, he seemed to know everyone and everything that went on in San Pablo. Amoe found the button still marked as ‘Home,’ on her phone. It seemed to take a long time for anyone to answer. Eventually she saw the dishevelled face of her mother.

“Darling, are you ok ? Is there a problem ?”

“Everything’s fine Mom, can you get Daddy ?”

Her mother was looking behind her and Amoe could just make out the shape of her father, still asleep in bed.

“He’s very tired, we didn’t get home until late.”

“Please, I need to speak to Daddy. It’s really important.”

Eventually her father was there. How old he looked, when had he started to look old ? He was trying to smile at her, but looked half asleep.

“Yes Princess, are you ok ?”

"It's Bradford Daddy. I think he's involved in something, some kind of secret government army. You seem to know people and....."

"AMOE !!"

He'd shouted at her ! He'd never shouted at her before, in her entire life. He was glaring at her too and holding his finger to his lips. He knew, it was obvious, probably knew more about her lover than she did. Amoe simply nodded at her father.

"You haven't been to see us in a while. Come over for breakfast, your mother will like that."

"Yes Daddy."

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There were no dramatic wall signs on Sub Level 4. No warnings about dangerous electrical current, or being restricted in some way. It was where the offices were that every organisation needs, but keeps hidden away in basements. One door even had 'Sanitation Manager,' written on it, which amused him.

"Something major happened here." Said Maria.

It was the first uniformed armed guards they'd seen, though the academy didn't have a huge contingent. If you couldn't trust student cops to behave, who could you trust ?

"Blaster fire." Said Bradford. "They didn't even get a chance to draw their weapons."

They both had large cauterised holes, right through their chests. They looked old enough to be retired cops, doing a bit of guard work at the nice safe academy. The tracks were beginning to disappear now, most of the survivors had obviously come from the offices on S4.

"I know where I am now." Said Bradford. "The tunnels aren't far now."

The tunnels were used to transport luggage and equipment, usually on carts linked together and pulled slowly by electric powered buggies. The students also used them to avoid the frequent tropical storms and the night time curfews.

"I'm going to get all this on camera and send it to Ginger." Said Maria.

There were three elevators near the tunnel entrance, two for people and a large one for freight. The freight elevator had been blown apart, the doors bent and hanging out at weird angles. There were bodies too, most looked like students caught up in something nasty. Two more academy security guys had died and while Maria checked them over for ID, Bradford looked at the dead subversive.

"What the hell happened here ?" Asked Maria.

"We'll probably never know." Answered Bradford.

Sometimes a lack of curiosity was a good thing, it meant having very few sleepless nights. A dead sub was a plus, a dead sub was evidence and the first they'd seen. Bradford pulled the mask off the sub's face and found a girl, a pretty one, when she'd been alive. Maybe he was a throwback to a past age, but it always seemed worse, when a young girl joined a group like Dysto-Guerra.

"Damn !"

"What is it ?"

"A girl."

Maria was chuckling at him, she knew all his pet peeves by heart.

"Equality in everything now Bradford, even being an arsehole terrorist." She said.

He removed the girl's gloves and her prints were still intact. Some subs burned off their prints before going on a mission, but the dead girl had left hers alone. Face, prints, DNA, Maria would have a name pulled off the database in a matter of minutes.

"Full house." He said. "Prints, complete face and DNA."

While Maria prodded, probed and scanned, he examined the destroyed freight elevator. The blast had been inside and several people had been blown apart. It was impossible to tell how many had been in the elevator, little remained apart from blood and pieces of tissue. One of the elevators designed for people was open and empty; the other still had its doors closed.

Bradford used his full strength to push the doors apart and found a dead student inside. Nothing unusual about him at all, just a guy of about nineteen, with a hole in his abdomen. Bradford merely grunted and walked to the door for the stairs to Sub Level 5. No one ever went down to the very bottom level, ever, not even for illicit sex or to take drugs. It was full of pumps, pipes, boilers and heat exchangers. A few engineers might have been down there, but he doubted it. Everyone avoided S5 and he had no intention of going down there. Bradford returned to Maria.

"Bradford, meet Astrid." She said.

"She's perfect." He answered. "Just the sort of evidence I hoped we'd find."

He sat himself on the floor, watching Maria sending out information to the weekend warriors and PD489. Roland would know everything, but Ginger would be told the minimum possible. It had to be like that, the reservists leaked information worse than the cops.

"Tell me about her?" He asked.

"Astrid Cerone, age 19. Good girl, no police record, no history of subversive behaviour. Large family, including a father in the military."

Not the sort of girl to blow up police academies, but she'd done just that.

"Get Roland to organise raids on everyone." He said. "All her family, friends, lovers past and present. I want their doors bashed in before morning and tell him I expect results."

"Right way."

Astrid was perfect, the kind of evidence likely to have been destroyed by time and the diggers shifting rubble. They'd been given a break and he hoped the trail led to Samuel. He left her to get on with taking samples, blood, hair, even nails, it could all be useful. She might be on drugs and the source and type of drug might, just might, open up the route to Dysto-Guerra. He kept his light on the body, as Maria worked. She was happy and hummed a tune from the radio, badly. Maria lived for moments like this. After thirty minutes, she picked up her pack.

"I'm done, where next boss?" She asked.

"Do you fancy going back the way we came?"

She was shaking her head, the thought of climbing the constantly shifting rubble, was fairly horrific to both of them.

"The breeze is probably coming from a cave-in and the tunnels come to the surface in places." He said. "So I suggest that we head down the tunnel."

"Sounds a plan. Let's just hope the reservists don't bury us alive."

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They'd gone about a quarter of a mile when Maria's communicator buzzed and she began to laugh.

"Message from Ginger. It appears the torrential rain has washed out the route through the rubble. He says we'll need to find a different way out."

"And to think I was beginning to like him." Said Bradford.

They passed a few bodies and sections where the ceiling had partially collapsed, but they made good time and nothing had forced them to turn around. About a mile down the tunnel, they found one of the trolleys the bombs had been transported on. Just one, very strong trolley on about eight wheels, pulled by one of the academy's electric carts. It was pointed the way they were going, towards the coast.

"I think they killed the power packs." Said Bradford. "These things aren't designed to pull that kind of weight."

"Still, they've had hours to get to the coast and be far away by now."

"If they managed to avoid the blast !"

Maria just shrugged at him and took a few pictures of the trolley, which she sent to Ginger and Roland. Fifty yards later, they found the source of the breeze. A ventilation tower had collapsed and completely disintegrated.

"Probably been undermined by water for years." Said Maria. "The bombs just gave it that final shove."

There were a few ventilation towers, though the heat in the tunnels was a constant cause of annoyance to all who used them. The towers had slow moving fans, that barely kept the air flowing. Now the tower had collapsed, most of it ending up as a heap of rubble at the bottom of a sink hole.

"So nice to feel the rain, even if it is full of ash." Said Bradford.

He could see the sky, though no stars could penetrate the soot laden rain. Cool night air was rushing down and into the tunnels, freshening everything it touched. Bradford turned his light up full and examined the five storey hole that the collapsing tower had created.

"No use." Said Maria. "More dangerous than the way we came in and with the rain...."

He thought of Ginger arranging for ropes to be dropped from above, but it would still be a death trap. A good hundred feet or more, of sharp and nasty rubble, all just waiting to collapse.

"As a last resort then." He said.

"Yep."

A hundred yards or so further on, they heard the arguments. Several voices of all ages, all moaning at a guy called Gerald.

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Bradford wasn't trying to walk quietly, neither of them were. It was just that the people were arguing too much to hear them approach. An old lady seemed the most upset, really letting Gerald have a piece of her mind.

"I told you Gerald, told you many times. Waiting here was crazy, no one is coming for us. I don't know why we even bothered listening to you."

A young guy was next and then a middle age woman, all of them ripping into poor Gerald. Bradford had never even met Gerald, but he was already feeling sorry for him. He knocked on the door of the maintenance room and walked in, shining his light at the dozen or so people inside.

"Don't be alarmed." Said Bradford. "I'm Bradford and this is Maria and we're with the military."

"About fucking time !" Shouted the old lady.

The maintenance room was large and full of electric buggies and carts, in various stages of being repaired or serviced. The emergency lighting consisted of just two dim ceiling units, which looked filthy. They were all blinking, dazzled by their light.

"Who's in charge here ?" Asked Bradford.

The man who stepped forward had to be Gerald. He was wearing a sad expression and a clerical collar. Bradford's training had taught him how to handle many things, but a pastor and his flock, stuck in a tunnel, wasn't one of them.

"Hi, I'm Brother Gerald. These are some of my parishioners."

"Are you here to rescue us ?"

The question had been asked by a child of about seven. Bradford hadn't noticed the children before, things just kept getting better.

“Where are the rest of your team ?” Asked Gerald.

Eventually they’d have to know there was no team, but that news could be broken to them gently. The important thing was for them to see something happening.

“It’s important to know who you all are and let your relatives know you’re safe.” He said. “Maria will take a picture of each of you and ask for your full name and date of birth.”

The old lady was pulling at Maria’s arm.

“I heard that my citizenship number is sufficient as an ID.”

“Don’t worry, you can whisper your date of birth to me.”

Ten seconds and Maria had them in an orderly queue and she was taking pictures and talking to them all, as though they were old friends. Bradford doubted if he’d ever have that skill, or if he even wanted it. He went back into the tunnel and tried to connect with Ginger.

“We’ve found a visiting pastor and a group of his parishioners.” Bradford said. “Maria is getting their details, but there are over a dozen of them, including kids.”

“Yeah, the academy gets quite a few visiting church groups. No one is quite sure why. Are any of them injured ?”

Maria was prodding his arm and whispering in his ear, before returning to Gerald and his flock.

“No, they’re all fit and well. Maria has just told me that they have picnic baskets and aren’t likely to starve in a hurry. When can you send someone for them ?”

“Ahhhh picnic baskets, of course.” Answered Ginger. “The academy had famous gardens and immaculate lawns. Many simply came to enjoy a picnic on a sunny day.”

Bradford could feel himself getting tense. The conversation should have been about how long until a rescue team could arrive, not about immaculate lawns.

“All very nice.” He said. “When can you get these people out of here ?”

“Hang on, the DisOps wants a word with you.”

Bradford listened to static, as his call was transferred to another tent on the surface.

“Bradford, this is Graham Molyneux. I hear you’ve found a group of survivors ?”

“Yes, a pastor on some kind of church outing, with over a dozen parishioners.”

“We have a problem.”

“Yes Sir, what kind of problem ?” Bradford Asked.

Muttering, lots of muttering between Graham and a few others, then he was back.

“Digging down to you is just too dangerous Bradford. The ground is unstable and water logged. We can’t get in from the library building, again too dangerous.”

“So what do we do with them Sir ?”

“I’m not sure I like your tone Bradford.”

“I’m not too keen on being left with a dozen civilians to baby sit..... Graham.”

More muttering, a lot more. Someone talking about acceptable losses.

“Bradford, you can leave them, it’s up to you. We have no quick way of getting to them, so you’re their best hope, probably their only hope. I can have a rescue team waiting at the coastal exit from the tunnels. It’s your choice ?”

Bradford could just hear Maria in the maintenance room, asking a girl of about seven, what her name was.

“Have that rescue team waiting.” He said. “I’ll make sure these people get there.”

“Good man.”

Bradford re-joined Maria and helped her get people’s details. Then he told them that they were looking at all the rescue team they were going to get.

“There are problems getting down here.” He said. “Huge problems. Maria and I will lead you along the tunnels, right through to the exit on the coast.”

“That’s miles.” Said Gerald.

Maria was looking at him in disbelief. It was miles and there were children to consider.

“I know, but there really is..... No other way. There will be a full rescue team, waiting at the coast.” Said Bradford.

“Get your things together.” Said Maria.

Maria pulled him to one side.

“Really ? Walk this lot right through the tunnel network ?” She hissed.

“It’s us or nothing. Do you want to leave them behind ?”

She shook her head and went to help the pastor’s flock, getting their picnic baskets tidied up and dumping anything too heavy to carry.

“But we need to get out of here right away.” Said the old lady.

“Why Monica ?” Asked Maria. “Are you unwell ?”

Monica was looking at them as though they were idiots and Gerald was smiling at him. Now you’ll see, said Gerald’s smile, now you’ll know what I’ve had to put up with for hours.

“No silly.” Said Monica. “But we’ve been here for hours. I need to use the bathroom.”

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