

## Bradford II – Badlands

### Chapter 12 – Chip Flory

**“Marie had heard that before the time of troubles, computers could look for certain items of news. They’d push the results up onto a big screen, gently waking their owners with soft alarm tones. She just had Tobias putting his head around the door, yelling her name until she woke up.”**

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Another morning, another perfect jug of coffee and a plate with four flapjacks on it. Bradford pushed the plate towards Roland, knowing his PA had developed a bit of a thing for them. A normal morning in PD489, or at least it would have been, without the prisoner in the storage area. Roland turned his tablet around, allowing Bradford to see what the cameras saw, the ones in her cell.

“She has our interrogation people mystified.” Said Roland. “They don’t know what to make of her and they talk about her in hushed whispers.”

Allison Emily Chapman looked so harmless, sat on her bed as she ate her breakfast. Interrogation hadn’t even attempted to implant the idea of a chain around her ankle.

“I doubt if it would take and it might well act as a trigger.” He’d been told. “To be honest we’ve no idea what’s going on in her head.”

Interrogation had passed the problem along to Gillian, who did have some experience with human augmentation. Mainly from looking after him.

“Has Gillian got any ideas ?” He asked.

“Not at the moment, the lab are running tests later today.”

Allison fascinated him, another human augmented to be just as fast and strong as him. She looked so..... Normal. They came in for her breakfast tray as he watched, four heavily armed operatives. They’d have seen the scene of crime pictures and heard the stories from Sequel’s team. It seemed highly likely that Allison had killed at least two of his operatives and the guards would know that.

“I can understand our people being nervous Roland. Just make sure they know that we need her alive.”

“They know that and so far, she’s been a model prisoner.”

Bradford picked up the phone on his desk and pressed the button to contact the lab. Tamara answered, the sound of her voice making him smile.

“Morning Tamara, is Gillian there ?”

She was and she wasn’t too busy to join him in the unofficial cell area. Roland arranged for a few chairs to be placed in Allison’s cell and actually seemed happy at being invited to join him.

“Lab results are fine Roland, but we need to talk to her. I’d like your thoughts on her condition.”

The extra guards were noticeable as soon as they came out of the elevator in the storage area. Two heavily armed guards covering the elevator and emergency stairs, just in case Allison got past all the other guards. There had to be about twenty operatives guarding her cell, led by Jules Schneider, AKA Sequel. Roland must have authorised the overabundance of guards.

“I know she killed some of ours Roland, but halve the number of guards and find Sequel something better to do.”

Gillian was waiting outside Allison’s cell, which was officially a storage area for corrosive substances. Like Hector before her, Allison was now in the limbo area of law enforcement. She hadn’t been officially arrested and PD489 could pretty much do what they wanted with her. Tamara was there too, she seemed to have been given the job of Gillian’s note taker.

“We’re ready to enter her cell.” Said Sequel.

Four guards with fuck off size blasters, all wearing heavy duty body armour. They looked nervous too, just the sort of thing that might trigger Allison. It seemed that Gillian shared his concerns.

“No armed guards, or we’re unlikely to get anything out of her.” She said.

No arguments, his people were well trained and discipline was good. Sequel merely nodded at him, before taking his heavily armed operatives away from the cell door. Not that they went far, standing near a pile of boxes about ten yards away.

Roland knew the code for the door panel and there were two physical keys. No one had ever been locked up with more efficiency, his people had to be scared of Allison Chapman. Bradford had no idea where the chairs had come from. They looked like the ones in the public waiting room, quite comfortable with tan coloured fabric. Allison was sat in one, drinking a cup of something hot and brown. She didn’t bother to stand as they entered.

“No, they took away my breakfast before I’d finished. I’m determined to drink my coffee.”

“That wasn’t my doing Allison, finish your coffee.” Said Bradford.

For a homicidal killing machine, their prisoner seemed remarkably calm and harmless. She had that certain something though, that sexual chemistry that had gained her so many male admirers and probably a few female ones too. Bradford wasn’t immune and if he hadn’t been happily married.....

“Are you aware of why we arrested you ?” He asked.

“You think I killed all those people.”

“Are you telling us you didn’t ?” He asked.

There was something about her movements, the tilt of her head, the avoidance of eye contact. He’d been lied to a lot during his years with PD489 and he knew Allison was about to lie to him.

“I saw the bodies..... But I’d never do anything like that. Never, I just couldn’t.”

“There is a chance that you’re being used as a weapon.” Said Gillian. “Though you might be completely unaware of it.”

Roland was bringing up similar types of killings on his tablet, even the killing of Doug’s guards had certain similarities to the deaths in Allison’s apartment. A long thin blade had been used then though and a blaster.

“Are you good with a blaster Allison ?” Asked Bradford.

“No, I don’t even own a blaster. Dimitri was a good shot, but I hate blasters.”

“You’re good with a cleaver, almost took my head off.”

“No ! No ! It wasn’t me ! I would never hurt anyone.” Yelled Allison.

Bradford tensed, as did the others. Something was triggering Allison, but it wasn’t being put under stress. Not that Bradford thought it would be, or Allison would have wiped out half the drivers on the expressway by now. He decided to push his luck a little further.

“That’s crap and you know it.” He said.

Her face went a dangerous shade of red, but Allison wasn’t leaping at him, with intent to kill. She was glaring at him with that same look in her eyes. The look that said she was lying.

“You really woke up at several crime scenes, covered in blood and surrounded by dead bodies. Yet you never once wondered why you were always there ? You never once thought you might have done the nasty deed ? You’d have to be pretty stupid Allison and you don’t strike me as being stupid.”

There had been three seconds of her breathing very fast. Bradford had tensed, waiting for her to go for him. She’d sighed though, almost a sigh of relief and he’d known she was about to tell him the truth. Maybe only some of the truth, as much as she could allow herself to say at that time.

"You have to believe me, I had no idea for quite some time." She said. "Dimitri always had people around him and they must have been very good at cleaning me up. Not perfect at it though, I often found bits of blood under my fingernails. Sometimes flakes of blood fell out of my hair and coloured the water around my feet in the shower. I thought I might be ill for a while, I even consulted a doctor. The truth was too bizarre to guess at though and it took two years for me to be certain that I was killing people."

She didn't cry, though he hadn't expected her to. Allison went quiet for a minute or two. Gillian sat on the bed next to her, holding her hand.

"What made you certain, what happened?" He asked.

"His men must have stripped me naked and wiped me clean, every time." She said. "That thought hit me before any guilt. Does that make me a bad person?"

"We really do want to help you." Said Gillian. "When did you know Allison?"

She sighed again and he whispered to Roland, asking him to order some fresh coffee on his tablet, his battlebox as he liked to call it. Gillian hugged Allison and the coffee had arrived, before she was able to continue answering his question.

"I'm sorry, so many other emotions arrived with that knowledge." She said. "It was the street people, a chance encounter really. None of Dimitri's guys there to clean me up and put me to bed. I'd seen the same group of street people quite a bit, shouting out insults as I passed, demanding money. They could be quite aggressive, but nothing had ever happened.... Until that night."

"What happened?" He asked.

"I have no idea, that's why it affected me so badly. I was living in a fairly seedy part of 17 East then, a second floor apartment in a building that really needed pulling down. There was a line of four dumpsters in an alley behind the apartment block and I woke up lying next to one of them."

She was telling the truth, he was certain of it.

"That must have been awful." Said Tamara.

"It was, I wasn't alone. It must have been about an hour after dawn and I had the company of five dead street people. It seemed to bring back some memories my mind hadn't wanted me to see. I knew then that I'd killed those five people, probably with my bare hands. Other too, the memories refused to stop once they'd begun."

"You were there all night, no one found you?" Asked Gillian.

Gillian had led a fairly cosseted existence working for LabSync4, only the best housing in the best city districts. Bradford understood what life was like in 17 East. He'd once found a body so decomposed that it was just a pile of bones. That had been in the corner of a public park, or more accurately an overgrown lot, which was called a public park.

"I'm not surprised." He said. "People keep themselves to themselves, especially if it looks like a gang related thing. What do you think triggered you that night?"

"Blood I think, my own if I'm wounded... Though that is a guess and there are probably others things. I know it's not just being hurt, I've been hurt by accident and Chris Dudley hurt me quite badly. I never became a monster and killed him."

"We can help you Allison." Said Gillian. "I might be able to stop it happening, stop the monster coming out at all."

Bradford wasn't sure if he wanted the beast removing from Allison, she might be useful as she was. Control was the thing, she needed to be able to consciously control the shift to whatever she became. He no longer saw her as an immediate threat and settled back in his chair.

“We want to help you Allison.” He said. “No one wants to lock you up, for murders you weren’t aware of committing. Dimitri made you an unwitting weapon, his perfect assassin. There is a problem though. My lab people might well have to perform minor surgical procedures, they will definitely need to take blood samples. I can’t risk you being triggered and killing them.”

She was nodding at him, which was a good sign. Allison wasn’t stupid, she understood and had probably seen where the conversation was leading.

“What do you want to do to me ?” She asked.

“Nothing awful, you have my word. I’d like you to be put into an induced coma, at least until the physical tests have been completed. Is that alright Allison ?”

“Yes, of course.”

“First though, please tell us about the other things you suspect might have triggered you ?”

Tamara took notes as Allison reeled off quite a long list, though it was all being recorded. The list was too long, she’d obviously developed an obsession about it, but who wouldn’t.

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Maggie quite liked the bunker. There was plenty of tinned food and several fully equipped kitchens, which was all new to her. She hadn’t been attacked by anything either, which was a pretty rare thing in the Badlands. Thinking back on it, not being chased, bit or stung by something or other, would have made it a really good day in Desperation. She was clean, well fed and armed with an impressive looking assault rifle.

“I love this place.” She said, to no one in particular.

“If I could get past these doors, I’d be ecstatic.” Said Hector.

“I’m not sure if I want to go in there.” Said Roxy. “There are a lot of flashing red lights.”

Their second morning in the bunker. They’d given up on opening the doors the night before, but were back there after breakfast. A double set of tough looking metal doors, with rubber sealing strips right round them.

“Serious fucking doors.” Jim had called them.

There were scratches on the doors now, though the silver metal had been perfect. A hard alloy of some kind was Hector’s best guess, which had resisted all their attempts to open them. She looked through one of the small armoured glass windows.

“There really are a lot of flashing red lights.” She said.

A corridor leading from the lobby in Sub Level 3. No signs to give any clues, apart from yet more bio-hazard posters on the walls. Lights though, lots of them. All in banks of three and all of them red.

“We could go and find some water filters.” She suggested.

“She’s got a point.” Said Roxy. “We’re not opening these doors any time soon.”

“I’m not giving up, but we did promise filters for Pile o’ Bones.” Said Hector. “It’ll mean another trudge back to the service elevator.”

“I hate that thing.” Added Jim.

It was that side of your eye thing. Maggie was sure she’d seen something moving in the shadows, at the far end of the corridor.

“Oh, there’s.....”

She looked back and it was gone, just an empty corridor with lots of flashing red lights.

“What’s wrong ?” Hector asked her.

“I saw something in the shadows, something quite big.”

“What did it look like ?” Asked Roxy, pushing her face up against the other window.

“I’m not sure, large and moving quickly.”

“Let me look.”

She moved back, letting Hector look down the corridor. It hurt, when he looked at Roxy and shook his head in a particular way.

“We’re all a bit on edge Maggie.” Said Roxy.

“I’m not making it up, I saw something.”

Hector one side, Roxy the other, both patting her shoulders as though she was a toddler.

“We’re not saying you made it up.” Said Roxy.

“I just need to think of a way to open those doors.” Said Hector. “Then we’ll go looking for what you saw.”

It was an awful trudge, back down the stairs, through Sub Level 4, to get back to the freight elevator. None of them quite trusted the old elevator with its ‘Freight Only’ signs. Maggie pressed the call button and nothing happened. No sound of the motor starting up, none of the usual worrying vibration in the cage doors.

“Oh no, there must be a zillion stairs to climb.” She said.

“Press it again.” Said Roxy.

The second press worked, she heard a motor come to life somewhere.

“I know last time was a false alarm.” Said Hector. “But we really should move back a bit.”

They moved back into the awful sweaty corridor, which had to be hotter than hell. Maggie felt sweat dripping into her eyes, as she raised her assault rifle. It was a long hot twelve minutes, before someone pulled back the cage of the freight elevator. Maggie started to squeeze the trigger on her weapon.

“Oh fuck Chip, what are you doing here ?” She asked.

She liked the boy well enough, but following her into the Badlands ! It was weird, awkward and downright creepy.

“I thought you might need a hand.” He replied.

She hugged him, even kissing his cheek. They’d all changed into fresh clothing, military fatigues they’d found on level 2, while hunting for bedding and mattresses. Chip Flory looked so scruffy, his ancient rifle so antiquated.

“You shouldn’t have come, there are things inside an area we can’t get into. It’s dangerous here.”

Too late she remembered that you never tell a boy something is dangerous. It flips a button in their head, which makes them act extra stupid.

“We can use him for bait I suppose.” Said Hector. “For when we go after the dangerous things.”

“How did you find us ?” Asked Roxy.

“It wasn’t too hard. I knew the direction and you left a lot of footprints in the hard sands. I found the open door next to the fan and after that it was really easy. I followed the trail of grubby boot marks and broken packing cases to the elevator. I pressed the bottom button as it was covered in greasy finger marks.”

“That’ll be from the hot dogs.” Said Jim. “We found about a dozen cases of tinned hot dogs.”

“There was bread mix too, but it was about eighty years out of date.” Said Maggie.

“Eighty years is still pretty fresh for the Badlands.” Said Chip.

“We’re looking for water filters..... You can come.” She told him.

Maybe she should have asked if he’d eaten that day, he had just walked all the way from Pile o’ Bones, on his own. He looked happy enough though, following her into the freight elevator. Chip was one more person for the elevator to carry though and there was a maximum weight sign.

“It says 1,164 Kg max weight, is that enough ?” She asked.

“That’s plenty.” Replied Roxy.

“Those signs are just for insurance purposes.” Added Hector.

It was the second time he’d used that excuse and it still sounded unconvincing. Her finger hovered over the elevator buttons.

“Which floor ?” She asked.

“Level 2.” Said Jim.

It was the first time Jim had given anything that could be remotely called an instruction. It just wasn’t Jim like, so everyone stared at him.

“There were floor plans on the wall.” He said. “Near where we found the dry mattresses.”

“Fine, Level 2 it is then.” Said Roxy.

The elevator rattled quite a bit, but delivered them safely to a cool dry corridor on Level 2. It was a relief after the hot humid conditions they’d just left. Jim took them to the room where they’d found half a dozen decent mattresses and another working oil lamp.

“There they are..... Floor plans.” Said Jim.

There were plans, stretching off quite some way into the distance. Hector finally found the area marked as ‘Water Filtration,’ on the western edge of Level 4.

“There’s even a small room marked ‘Storage.’ I bet they’re in there.” He Said. “Where does the elevator drop us off..... Can anyone see the freight elevator ?”

“Here, not far at all.” Said Chip.

“Yes, twenty five yards away, forty if we get lost.” Said Hector.

They were close to where they’d found crates of new clothing. Chip was given time to change into a smart looking set of military fatigues. He looked far better now, less like a boy and more like a fighter.

“Come on, let’s get those filters.” Said Roxy.

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Marie had heard that before the time of troubles, computers could look for certain items of news. They’d push the results up onto a big screen, gently waking their owners with soft alarm tones. She just had Tobias putting his head around the door, yelling her name until she woke up.

“Marie..... The Pastor wants to see you.”

“What time is it ?”

“About ten. Your father has just ordered a late breakfast, so you’ve time to celebrate a little.”

Despite his grumpy exterior, she never doubted that Tobias was on her side. He might shake his head at some of her antics, but he had helped her quite a lot. He was stood in the doorway to her room, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“Too early for games Tobias. What would I be celebrating ?”

“Turn on your radio, ZMB seem to be talking about nothing else.”

She wasn’t a morning person and just getting out of bed made her feel tired again. That would pass, as would the stiffness in her joints. It was all self-inflicted of course, too many nights sleeping on drafty floors, with someone or other. Marie showered first, before turning on the small radio beside the makeshift bed in her room. It was supposed to be her office, but she liked sleeping there.

‘Books are making a comeback. After decades of falling sales, books printed on paper are now selling more than datacube publications. Publishers believe it’s the start of a new golden age for the printed word.’ Said the perky voice of the lady reading the news on ZMB.

“Yeah right, just like the other ten golden ages.” She muttered.

Marie found half a bottle of tepid water and drank it dry. Had she drunk too much the night before ? Probably, as she couldn't remember going to bed.

'Bad news for those who rely on under the counter meds. Dimitri has been killed. I know there was some fake news circulating about him dying last week, but this has been confirmed with the San Pablo police. Dimitri has been killed..... More details at midday.'

"Fuck."

It was like being given her life back, no constant looking over her shoulder. A lot of people knew she'd put the word out about Dimitri, far too many people. His people were pros though, they didn't hold grudges, there was no money in it. It was far too early, but she drank two mouthfuls of cheap tequila, straight from the bottle.

"I am going to stop drinking and be a credit to my dad." She muttered.

She'd tried before of course, even succeeded in being sober for a few months. Her worst record was in avoiding casual sex with strange guys. That particular promise to herself had lasted for about three days. Drink was the problem, always had been. She passed Tobias on her way to breakfast with Pastor Ivor.

"Happy now ?" He asked.

"Yes..... Did you ?"

"No, rumour says that PD489 got him, but that might be crap."

Marie decided to go out after seeing her dad. A little shopping therapy was the order of the day. Some new expensive dresses and underwear to match, something sexy. For some reason buying underwear always made her happy.

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Camila wasn't averse to a little publicity, or she wouldn't have agreed to the piece for San Pablo Vogue. Publicity was good, it was free advertising. There could be a downside though, as she'd discovered at about five that morning. She'd been in the old electric van, which no one noticed. It was ordinary, anonymous, just as she liked it. The news vendor knew her and opened his door as she approached. She'd never admit it later, but she was excited, eager to see how the pictures looked in the Vogue article.

"Are they in yet Bernie ?" She asked.

"Only just."

He'd ordered quite a stack on them, still wrapped up and bound together with plastic ties. He cut them free, giving her the top copy.

"I think it'll be my best seller this week." Said Bernie. "Everyone will want to read it."

She handed him a fifty Herbert note, refusing to accept any change. Camila did claim his old wooden chair near the counter though, eagerly opening the magazine. They'd spelt her name right and her children were mentioned quite a lot.

'.....Being a single mother shouldn't stop you being a success....'

The words were perfect, even if they had made her sound a bit like a recovering addict. They overdid things of course to add emphasis, that's what journalists did. It was the pictures which worried her, she looked so.....More like a TV celebrity than a business woman.

"Wow, nice pictures." Said Bernie.

He had a copy in his hands, a huge smile on his face. Crap, that was how everyone was going to look, though mainly the guys of course. She hadn't knowingly posed for a picture with her skirt halfway up her thigh, but there it was. Another picture showed far more cleavage than she'd intended to reveal.

"I didn't Bernie..... I mean.... They must have kept the cameras recording, all the time."

“They’re great Camila, I’m going to have to order more copies, lots more.”

The words made her sound like an ex-junkie and the pictures made her look like a tramp. Worst of all, everyone she knew was certain to see them. No use asking Bernie to burn them, he was already talking about ordering another two hundred copies. Anyway, there were other newsvendors in San Pablo, dozens of them.

“Can you sign this one, please ?”

So tempting to tell Bernie to fuck off, but she’d known him for years. He’d been a friend in the old days, when few had wanted to know her. She signed where he was pointing, right below the picture with far too much cleavage.

“I’m going to stick it on the wall, right behind the till.”

“Whatever Bernie, whatever.”

She sat in her van for a while, seriously considering taking the kids on a long vacation. She could afford to rent a nice villa in Pandan for a few months. No, she was going crazy.

“I can’t drag the kids about, as if they were luggage.” She muttered.

They had friends and Mateo was finally doing well at school. She could get someone to keep an eye on the kids, Sofia was almost a grown woman anyway. Stock them up with food, get a few people to drop in on them, maybe hire a housekeeper for a few weeks. Yes, it would work.

“I’ll take Cruz with me, it’ll be fun.”

She was seeing Hector in a few days time, just enough time to arrange things. Her business was deliberately organised to run smoothly if she wasn’t there for a while. She’d prepare herself for the Badlands and offer to help Hector for a few weeks. He’d have no say in the matter of course, she needed to get out of the city for a while. Sofia would probably end up fighting the temporary housekeeper, but no plan is ever perfect.

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Hector hadn’t wanted to lock them inside, they still hadn’t found the main door to the bunker. If Chip could find and open the small door so easily, then others could. There were gangs of subversives roaming the Badlands, real subversives, who’d kill for a bunker full of food. There were raiders and gangs of bandits too, though far less than there had once been.

“Make sure the handles are locked down.” He’d told them.

Repairing the hole in the grill over the broken fan was a skilled job, one requiring a lot of time and expertise. Jim helped him stretch several feet of razor wire over the hole, weaving it backwards and forwards until the hole was covered in it.

“I wouldn’t even attempt to get through that.” Said Chip.

“A grenade trap would add a nice finishing touch.” Said Jim.

“We might kill someone like Chip.” Said Roxy. “A tourist from Pile o’ Bones.”

It wasn’t a perfect deterrent to would be raiders, so they locked the next door along the corridor, jamming an old metal bed frame against the handles.

“Now it’s secure, now we can explore without worrying who might get in.” Said Hector.

“Supposing we need to get out ?” Asked Maggie.

“First we find and make sure we can open the main door.” Said Roxy. “Then we go to Level 4 and pick up the water filters.”

The floor plan showed the main entrance to the bunker, on Level 1 and a good mile and a half from where they’d entered the bunker. Luckily there was one long main corridor, which ran the length of the underground complex. Plenty of blast doors of course, but all of them were open. It was

probably after midday by the time they reached the heavy metal door, though there was no way of being certain. Some clocks had begun to work, but they all showed a different time.

"How will we ever open that?" Asked Chip.

"It looks huge, but there's probably just one button to open it." Said Hector.

"A switch." Said Roxy.

Not even a large switch, no bigger than the sort you'd use to operate a garage door. He watched, as the huge metal door, began to move. Plenty of scratching noises, as the huge door opened for the first time in decades. It had to be ten feet across and four feet thick, the silver metal glinting in the lights.

"That is amazing, we have to bring everyone to live here." Said Maggie. "It's safe, there's food and lights that work."

"Why not bring everyone here?" Asked Chip.

Hector had to smile, he'd heard such talk in the past, from people who'd never lived underground. Somewhere safe and secure, very quickly felt like a prison.

"People like to live outside." He said. "We need light to survive, natural light, sunlight. People go crazy if they stay underground for too long. Why do you think all the bunkers we see are empty?"

"He's right, we're creatures who need the light." Said Roxy. "Far better to gut this place and use what we find to improve the settlements."

It was light outside, Hector judged the time to be mid-afternoon, by the light level. They didn't wander far before coming back into the safety of the bunker.

"Ok, we know it works, I'll close it up." Said Roxy.

The door took longer to close than open, finally settling itself into the door surround with a reassuring clang. They were safe inside again, behind an impenetrable door, made of some kind of super alloy. They'd all noticed the two elevators, side by side to the right of the main door. Roxy asked the question, there was a decision to be made.

"It's a long way back to the freight elevator, which we all hate." She said. "I think we should use one of these elevators. After Maggie has tested them both of course."

"We'll get lost." Said Hector. "We know the way from the freight elevator."

Maggie had already jumped into both of them, pressing the bottom button. They all watched the numbers, as the elevators sped down through the floors.

"Wow, these elevators really move." Said Maggie.

"Any strange extra lower floors?" Asked Roxy.

"No, but just Sub 4, neither of them stops at Sub 3."

"It seems they don't want casual visitors to Sub 3." Said Hector. "Are we going to risk getting lost, or go back to the freight elevator?"

The elevators had reached the bottom and Maggie was already bringing them back. He didn't like to admit it, but he was quite keen on using an elevator which moved a bit quicker than the freight elevator.

'Bing.'

Both elevators arrived together, opening up to show clean, well-lit interiors.

"We really should explore most of Level 4." Said Roxy.

"We've nowhere else to go." Said Chip.

"I know when I'm beaten." Said Hector. "Let's get lost on Level 4."

Maggie chose which elevator to use, simply by walking into the one on the right. They followed her inside, to find her pointing at the wall and smiling.

'Max load 1,164 Kg – 17 People.'

"All aboard." Shouted Maggie.

She pressed the button for Level 4 and he felt the floor drop away from his feet. They were definitely in the express elevator. In almost no time, the doors opened to reveal a clean well-lit corridor.

"Looks good..... So far." Said Jim.

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Marie felt confident enough to leave the old cathedral without asking Tobias for a couple of his guys to act as her guards. Shopping alone was no fun though, no one to bounce ideas off and go 'Ooo,' at that rather daring dress you're thinking of buying. She called her friend Judy, who always seemed keen on spending hours browsing for clothes and shoes.

"Judy, are you busy today ?..... Oh, you're late anyway, call in a sickie..... Please."

Judy folded on a promise for a free lunch at somewhere of her choice. Marie dressed down a little to visit the Destiny Mall, it had a bit of a reputation, even if it did have the best shops in San Pablo. She met Judy in the coffee shop near the large Gucci store, which had nothing to do with 'the' Gucci of course. Judy was the opposite of Marie, pale white skin, topped by platinum blonde hair. They'd always received a lot of attention, arriving anywhere together.

There had been coffee first of course, followed by an update on each other's private lives. As always they agreed that most of their problems were caused by men and booze.

"If only I could avoid them both..... But I'm addicted." Said Marie.

They laughed for a while, before Judy brought them back to the serious subject of shopping for clothes.

"Where first ?" She asked.

"Gucci, they do the best underwear."

They both came out with two carrier bags full of lingerie, which Marie had insisted on paying for.

"My treat today."

It was the start of a whole day, with nothing to do but shop until they dropped. Marie had no real idea why she'd looked so hard at the man in the ST Air ticket office. 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.

"Stop a minute Judy.... I think I know him."

"Who ?"

"The guy at the counter in ST Air. The one wearing the floppy hat."

Big floppy hats had been huge two winters ago, but now no one wore them. The hat covered half the man's face, but Marie knew him. She'd recognise the face of Chris Dudley anywhere.

"He looks a bit old for you." Said Judy.

"When has that ever stopped me ? Will you do me a huge favour ?"

Judy gave a huge sigh.

"Depends Marie, my dad will kill me if the cops bang on our door again."

"Nothing like that Judy, promise. Just go in there and look at a few brochures. See if you can find out where he's going..... A name too if you can, the name he's travelling under."

"Why not just ask him ?"

"It's complicated..... Do it and I'll buy you two things from Versace. Anything you want."

"Ok."

Judy was brilliant, a natural criminal if she wasn't so afraid of her dad. Her friend looked over the brochures, taking one right up to the counter. Marie watched as Judy scribbled on the back of the brochure, standing close enough to Chris Dudley to know if he suffered from halitosis. It was a genius move, if a little risky. Dudley left after tucking an envelope into his pocket, while Judy remained, talking to the counter staff for at least five minutes. That was clever, it looked right, though waiting for her was frustrating. Judy returned with a huge grin on her face.

"Did you manage to hear anything?" Marie asked.

Judy gave her a brochure for sailing holidays in the New Marshall Islands. There was a box on the back for notes and Judy had written down everything she'd wanted to know.

"You are a genius..... I'll buy you three items from Versace."

"I quite fancy some shoes from Blahniks."

"They're yours..... Lead on genius eavesdropper."

Marie copied most of the note to her phone, but was still undecided on who to send it to. Camila was the obvious choice, but she'd hurt her and kept her prisoner for several days. Bradford had never hurt her, or even threatened to.

'Chris Dudley is travelling under the name of Nathan Huffman.

Tried to get a ticket for tomorrow, but no available seats.

Booked on the afternoon flight to New Borongan in two days time.'

Bradford, she'd decided to send the information to the man who'd promised to look after her father, if he ever offended anyone enough to get himself arrested or killed. She added a line before sending the message.

'Keep the promise you made – Marie.'

She had to run to catch up with Judy, who was entering their shoe heaven, a shop that both of them thought of as an almost sacred place. Not 'the' Blahniks of course, but the shoes were the best in San Pablo.

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They'd managed to get turned around by bad signage quite a few times, but Roxy didn't really mind. They were in the finite space of a bunker and Level 4 covered about the same area as a large village. There was a limit to how lost they could get, before finding a sign that sent them the right way again.

"Water filtration is important." Said Hector. "You'd think there'd be more signs for it."

"We found it. Over here, this way." Yelled Maggie.

She was quite a way off, but not alone. Chip was with her and they'd been scouting ahead for quite a while. Not too far ahead, always within earshot, but far enough for a little privacy. Roxy had assumed they wanted to get reacquainted with each other. Snogging each other's faces off was the way Hector had put it. They found Maggie, in front of a set of double door with;

'Water Filtration.' Written above them.

"Well done Maggie." Said Hector.

The lights hadn't survived as well as other places, but Hector found the store room fairly quickly. The spare filters were even labelled and there were all the connection pipes, everything wrapped in water proof packaging.

"Wow, they ran a good stores." Said Jim. "Not a sign of rust or decay on anything."

"Like finding the Holy Grail." Said Hector. "Two sets of everything, but we'd never be able to carry both sets of everything."

"We could come back another time." Said Roxy.

Would they though? As she said it, she admitted to herself that it was unlikely. It was a huge bunker with so many other levels to explore and Hector needed to meet Camila in a few days, or half of PD489 would start searching for him.

"Would a trolley help?" Asked Maggie. "I saw one left in a corridor, not that far away."

"Yes it would, just don't go alone." Said Roxy.

"I'll go with her." Said Chip.

"Don't be all day." Yelled Hector. "Remember, less snogging and stay alert."

"Oh, he's so rude." Said Maggie, as she left with Chip.

"Play nice Hector, you were young once." She told him.

"Yeah, yeah. These filters look like they were wrapped up yesterday. Everything is like that."

They were back quite quickly, pushing a heavy trolley with a squeaky wheel. Maggie looked quite excited by something.

"I bumped a desk getting these."

She was holding two dusty mugs with Deoxy Research Inc, written on them.

"We thought they looked cool." Added Chip.

"There was a computer on the desk and..... Best if you come and see." Said Maggie.

It almost made Roxy believe in fate, seeing the computer with a menu up on the screen. They'd tried other terminals, but an ID card of some kind had been required. The two kids had thought two mugs looked cool and had probably found the only logged in terminal in the bunker.

"Someone left their ID card plugged into the reader." Said Chip.

It was instinctive, to put her hand out to get the card, to see who they had to thank for access to the computer. It was Chip who grabbed her arm.

"No Roxy." He yelled. "Take it out and we'll need to know the log on and password to get back in."

"Sorry..... I just didn't think." She said.

"Looks like Chip is our computer expert." Said Hector.

"Well, not expert."

"Oh no, you're now our computer guru old buddy. I'll even get you a chair."

Hector wheeled over an office chair, covered in the fine grey dust that seemed to be everywhere. He even wiped the dust off with his arm, before pushing Chip down onto the seat. Poor Chip looked quite nervous, as his fingers hovered over the keyboard.

"What do you want me to do?" He asked.

"Third menu item down." Said Maggie. "Select Data Retrieval."

Roxy caught Hector's eye and shrugged. The young seemed to always be better at tech than the previous generation.

"Where next?"

"There, at the bottom of the screen." Said Maggie. "Site Locations."

A press of a key and they had the location of every military facility there had been before the time of troubles. Not just bunkers, but hundreds of other facilities.

"I can filter it if you like." Said Chip. "Make it just show Deoxy Research sites."

"Yes, do that." Said Roxy.

The number of sites on the screen dropped to about six, all with their grid references and distances from where they were.

“We have a name for this place guys.” Said Hector. “Theta Lab Research...Hmmm, that’s a bit disappointing.”

“Hey, I worked out how to scroll across the map.” Said Chip.

“Look further into the Badlands.” Said Jim. “They’ll have gone there... I can feel it, in my bones.”

Chip scrolled across the map of a land that looked nothing like modern day San Pablo. The map showed part of a continent, with roads that ran right through what was now the Badlands. There was just one facility on that part of the map.

“Base Omega.” Said Hector. “Now that is a proper name, something to impress the troops and scare the crap out of the locals.”

“Are we really going there.” Roxy found herself asking.

“Grid references mean nothing without the old GPS system.” Said Jim.

“We have the direction from here and a distance.” Said Hector. “That’s all the information we need to find this.....Base Omega.”

“I’ll need to go home first.” Said Maggie. “I need some clean stuff.”

“We all need clean stuff Maggie.” Said Roxy. “And a few extra people. That is a long journey across some fairly nasty terrain.”

“Not to mention the fact that almost no one has gone that far into the Badlands.” Said Jim.

Chip had been tapping away at the terminal, occasionally trying to get their attention. He seemed a quiet and polite kid, but he’d obviously had enough of being ignored.

“Will you people listen to me !” He yelled.

“Don’t yell Chip, it’s rude.” Said Maggie.

“This is important. I found a way to open the containment doors for Sub 3.”

“Well done.” Said Hector.

“So, do you want me to open them ?” Asked Chip.

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