

## Bradford II – Badlands

### Chapter 17 – Saving Hector

**“Maggie wasn’t sure if she was going to like the interrogation of their prisoner. Camila had been given the job of getting information from the young man wearing military fatigues. There were all sorts of hints about Camila being good at loosening tongues, all said within earshot of the bound man.”**

⊖

Bradford leant back in the comfortable aircraft seat and felt relaxed, for the first time in days. Chris Dudley was another loose end tidied up, which would please Otis Herbert. Bradford now valued Allison as a potential full time asset for PD489 and best of all; he’d be in San Pablo for the birth of Rosa, his daughter. There was a whole list of tasks for PD489 to accomplish, but they were the routine stuff he left for Roland to worry about. On a good day Roland could worry enough for a dozen busy people.

“I thought you’d bring Camila with you.” He said to Gupta. “Was she busy ?”

“Roland knows more than I do about it. She hired a modern APC and went out into the Badlands to find Hector.”

“Why, was he in trouble ?”

“It’s a bit complicated..... Not that I believe in repeating rumours.”

“Repeat away old buddy..... When we ignored Hector before, he ended up being kept in a hole in the ground by subversives.”

Poor Gupta, he really did look torn between honesty and indulging in a bit of gossip.

“There is a rumour that Camila wanted to get out of San Pablo for a while. Until people had forgotten about the pictures.”

“That isn’t going to happen in a hurry.” Said one of his operatives.

Someone gave Bradford a much thumbed copy of that month’s San Pablo Vogue. The women in business piece was even mentioned on the front cover. Someone obviously thought that an interview with Camila Martínez was a big deal. He realised why Camila might want to get out of town for a while, when he saw the picture where her skirt was up around her waist.

“Bastards kept the camera running. Did she definitely say this was the reason she was going to find Hector ?”

Asked Bradford, while waving the magazine about.

“I don’t..... Honestly Roland knows more than I do.”

“Crap Gupta, stop being an idiot and tell me.”

Bradford instantly regretted his words. Calling Gupta an idiot in private was one thing, but not in front of an aircraft full of PD489 operatives.

“I’m sorry Gupta, it’s been a hell of a week. Please tell me, did Camila definitely tell anyone that she was leaving San Pablo to avoid gossip caused by these pictures ?”

“No Bradford, that’s just rumours. She took Cruz with her, because she knew Hector was heading deeper into the Badlands.”

It sounded like a replay of Hector vanishing before. Everyone assumed he was shackled up somewhere with a woman, or having a few months holiday. There were even rumours he’d gone over to the subversives again. All rumours, nothing but damn rumours.

“Rumours can be dangerous Gupta, they’re too easy to believe. Does Camila’s APC have burst messaging capability ?”

“Yes, but the Badlands screws up all comms, including burst technology. Camila sent a message saying they were about to leave somewhere called Desperation and head further into the Badlands.”

“Ok, give me an honest answer Gupta... Is Roland worried about Hector ?”

“Erm....Yasmine said he’s having kittens over it.”

Bradford knew that time to think it over was a bad idea. Unless he made the decision there and then, he’d send someone else to look for Hector. It wasn’t that he had a full diary or had to remain in San Pablo. It was Amoe and his promise to be there for the birth of their child.

“How long until we’re in burst transmission range to headquarters ?” He asked

“About..... Two hours and ten minutes.”

Bradford new that once he set everything in motion, the mission would build up its own momentum and he’d have to go.

“As soon as we’re in range, tell Roland to assemble a full team led by Sequel. We’ll need a heavy APC, sequel’s team and Yasmine.... Yes, a scene of crime person might be useful. You too of course Gupta and the VTOL will need a fast turnaround time.... Got all that.”

“Yes, I’ll put together an encrypted burst packet.”

“Add that we’ll leave once I get back with permission to go.”

“You’re going to see President Herbert ?”

“No, my wife Gupta. I need to ask Amoe if I can go.”

Everyone laughed but he didn’t care. There was a good two hours before they were within comms range of San Pablo. To Bradford that meant two hours of precious sleep.

~ ~

To Hector it felt as though the devil himself had run a hand over the left side of his head. The pain was excruciating, yet he couldn’t let it totally distract him. The man in the back of the truck was aiming again, wanting to put the next shot between his eyes.

“You bastard !” Shouted Hector.

Hector moved as he fired, three shots as he moved quickly to his right. Moving worked, the man’s next blaster shot missed him by at least a foot. One of Hector’s bullets missed, passing over the man’s shoulder. The second hit him in the shoulder, the third went into his nose and took off the back of his head as it came out again.

“This one is dead.” He yelled.

Even his own voice sounded different and there was blood on his left sleeve, quite a lot of blood. He really wanted to put his hand up to his ear, but realised feeling it might make the pain far worse.

Plus he might not like what he found. He’d seen men fighting with half the side of their face missing, kept on their feet by nothing except adrenaline.

“Pick that up and I will kill you.”

Maggie shouting at one of the three surviving men in uniform. All three of them were reaching for weapons after hearing Hector’s assault rifle firing. Maybe they thought the strangers intended to kill them all ? For whatever reason, Maggie’s threat didn’t work. All three of them aimed their blasters at his friends.

“If possible, we need one alive.” Shouted Hector.

His left ear seemed to be full of something dulling his hearing, maybe blood. Roxy had other things to worry about, but she still looked horrified when she saw the left side of his head. All hell broke loose when Maggie shot one of the men, two bullets into his chest.

"There's another one.... Near the front of the truck." Shouted Camila.

"I see him, leaning on the bonnet...Down everyone." Yelled Cruz.

Hector couldn't see the fifth enemy soldier, but he was able to get round the back of the truck and into a good position to see him if he moved. There was the sound of several assault rifles firing and Roxy cursing someone. Hector carefully put his head around the side of the truck, to be rewarded by a blaster shot just missing his head, the left side yet again.

"We need someone alive and talkative." He said. "Put your blaster down and the one left alive can be you."

It was dark, but Hector heard the man's blaster fire. He could see the metal glowing red, where the shot had hit the rear of the truck. There was also the smell of the paintwork burning, the sound of it bubbling, just inches from his head. Hector went right down onto his belly and slithered, right up to the double rear wheels. Rubber was good at absorbing blaster fire, as he'd learned in a few skirmishes in the past.

"Last time I'm going to make the offer. Surrender, talk and you'll live, I promise."

Another blaster shot and the smell of burning rubber from the tyres. Hector heard the sound he was hoping to hear, the whine of a blaster recharging, right in front of him. He didn't have long, so he was instantly up on his feet and running. He slammed the butt of his rifle into the man's forehead, before he'd even had a chance to react.

"I got him.... Alive and someone needs to tie him up..... It's me, coming round the front of the truck."

Cruz ran past him, several nylon ties in his hand. Hector guessed that Cruz always carried a few and that it wasn't a good day unless he had someone bound up and ready to torture before breakfast.

"It's me.... Hector." He yelled again.

All of the other three men were dead, one lying across the embers of a campfire. All of Hector's friends looked fine, though Roxy was limping.

"Were you shot?" He asked her.

"No, fell over a damn rock in the dark."

He held his hand well away from the left side of his head, pointing a finger roughly in the direction of his ear.

"Can someone look at this?"

"Yeah of course, sit by the campfire." Said Roxy. "I'll drag the dead guy away, he's beginning to smell like my Uncle Leo's barbecued ribs."

Camila helped her drag the dead man well away from the camp. Roxy put more wood on the fire, before raking it up to get a bit more light.

"Right Hector, let's see what's been damaged."

"I want to look too." Said Maggie.

Some might think it was nice to have two women fussing over them, but it was dark and they were using their fingers to prod and poke at him. Suddenly Satan had two extra helpers to jam red hot poker into the left side of his face.

"Damn.... Fuck ! Careful, that really hurts guys."

"Sorry, there's a lot of blood and I need to see what's damaged." Said Roxy.

"The blaster burnt the side of your head....That is really going to hurt in the morning." Said Maggie.

"I brought some military painkillers." Said Roxy.

"Is he going to live?" Camila shouted, while dragging a body into the undergrowth.

"Yeah.... It's just his ear."

Just his ear didn't seem to adequately describe the agony he was feeling right down the left side of his head. Maggie was even tutting, as though disappointed. The girl actually pulled at his ruined ear. "Owww, stop that Maggie.... It's agony."

"You just lost the top half an inch of your ear Hector, you'll be fine." She said.

Maggie wandered off as if bored, shouting out to Chip as she went.

"It's just his ear."

She said it in a disappointed tone of voice, as if his lack of a potentially fatal wound had let her down in some way. At least Roxy was being attentive and sympathetic.

"The skin is thin on the side of your head and it's been badly scorched. I'll go back and bring the APC up here, then we can get the wound cleaned up. The soldiers found a good spot to hide and we can use it for a while. Questioning our prisoner might take a day or two."

She said it in a way that made him grateful Roxy was on his side. They kissed, a kiss which became a snog that went on for a minute or too.

"Don't wander off, I'll be back with pain killers."

Roxy left and he smelt something cooking, something which smelt better than barbecued soldier.

Hector remembered the man cooking something on a camping stove in the back of the truck. He arrived there just as Camila and Cruz were dragging the dead man out of the truck.

"Same routine Cruz, drag him over to the other bodies and go through his pockets."

"Are we going to bury them now?" Asked Cruz.

"No, we'll dig just one big pit in the morning."

Hector left them to their gruesome task and climbed into the back of the truck. It was comfortable, a real home from home, if it hadn't been for the pool of blood. There were two old sofas and several bed rolls laid out on the floor. Hector went straight for the smell of cooking.

"A bit dry, but still edible." He muttered.

He turned off the gas and stirred the meal, before tasting a little. Mainly vegetables with a sprinkling of chili powder, but there was a taste of meat in there somewhere. There were plates and a few grubby spoons. Hector was halfway through a plateful when Roxy arrived with the first aid kit.

"I should have known, you always land on your feet."

"Tell my ear that, it's having a bad day. Get up here and eat, this stuff tastes pretty good."

"Fine, but after we've eaten I need to clean up your wound, maybe put in a few stitches."

He filled a plate for her and gave her the cleanest spoon he could find.

"Hmmm this isn't bad." She said.

"It's going to hurt isn't it Roxy? Doing my ear I mean."

"Oh yes Hector, it's going to hurt like hell."

~

~

Roland Baur was frantically busy when Bradford arrived, though he did quite enjoy it when his duties included the near impossible. Turning the VTOL around in time was the hardest.

"We'll need to ignore maintenance schedules and pre-flight checks Bradford." He said. "Are you happy with that? Do I have your permission to tell maintenance to ignore most of the safety procedures underlined in red on the workshop wall?"

"Do it, whatever needs doing Roland. The VTOL will be overweight too, we'll need a heavy APC with the new armour.... Yes I know that breaks more rules.... But..."

Bradford was giving him one of his lopsided grins, like a naughty child who knows he's going to get what he wants.

"Breaking rules is our forte at PD489 Roland, almost our raison d'être."

"Miram has a heavy APC in for service. I'll ask her to hurry, but you'll need to buy her a gift later. This is about the fifth time she'll have worked miracles for you."

"I know Roland, I know."

It was so hard to get angry with Bradford. Roland had been a reluctant gay guy, trying to bury his urges deep inside. Bradford had arranged a treat with Bobby, hiring the best gay escort in the New Nations. An offering as a thank you for a job well done. That night had opened up a whole world of sexual possibilities.... No, he could never get angry with Bradford.

"Yasmine wants to include Chet in the team. She says he's owed it for some reason."

"I can see that, yes put Chet in your battlebox as one of the team Roland. I have to go and see Amoe....Have everyone ready to go in about two hours."

"Impossible of course, but I'll get it done."

"I'm taking my motorbike, I'll be back in two hours."

There had been some strange news, but good strange news. Roland had been saving it up for when Bradford returned. It wasn't ideal to have to tell him the news quickly with little chance to talk it over, but good news is good news....

"Quickly before you go Bradford. San Pablo homicide have officially dropped the case and said you won't be required to give evidence."

"Brilliant, who is their suspect now ?"

"No Bradford, they've stopped investigating the murder of Kealani Lee."

"Why ? Do you know ?"

"President Herbert had the investigation cancelled, saying it wasn't in the public interest to take it further. I never knew he could do that, but he has."

Bradford had that faraway look he often had on his face, when the talk moved on to the murder of Amoe's father. It had to be hard, knowing the murderer would now never be brought to justice.

"Once his face started appearing on bank notes, I guess Otis began to think of himself as royalty. Don't tell anyone I said that though."

"Of course not Bradford."

"Ok, see you in two hours."

~

~

Maggie wasn't sure if she was going to like the interrogation of their prisoner. Camila had been given the job of getting information from the young man wearing military fatigues. There were all sorts of hints about Camila being good at loosening tongues, all said within earshot of the bound man.

"I'm not going to talk."

"No one has asked you to." Said Camila.

A pit was dug in the loose dry soil towards what Maggie thought of as the rear of the hill. It was furthest from the barely recognisable track, which Hector kept referring to as the road. Their prisoner was left to watch the shallow burial of his four friends, before they all took turns to dig another much smaller hole in the ground.

"I know you're just trying to scare me... I'm not talking."

"We might as well get it over with." Said Hector. "He's not going to talk."

"Anyone will talk if you cut them in the right places."

Cruz waved a huge knife about to leave no doubt about what he meant. Was it all playing mind games with their prisoner ? Maggie wasn't sure, so she was certain the young man probably wasn't sure either.

"We'll go through all their stuff now it's daylight." Said Camila. "And I mean everything.... Though we're mainly interested in notebooks, radios, any way they might have communicated with their base. Maps too of course, if you find any."

Their prisoner actually laughed.

"Maps lady..... no one has maps anymore."

"We've got lots of them." Maggie told him.

"Great, now we have to kill him." Said Roxy.

Did Roxy give her a slight wink after saying that ? Maggie didn't know whether to feel guilty, or smug as the part of some conspiracy to terrify the enemy soldier.

It didn't take them long to go through everything the soldiers had possessed. Going through the truck had been the hardest part, as Hector had claimed it as his home away from home. He fussed about, stopping Roxy from cutting up the cushions. Eventually Camila was sat on the ground in front of their prisoner, a few interesting finds in front of her. Cruz was standing to her left, tapping a large hunting knife against his thigh. Maybe it was the size of the knife or seeing his friends buried, but the man was no longer refusing to talk.

"I'm not really one of them, not really." He said. "I'm from a settlement to the north, a place called Fossdike's Corner."

"I've heard of that place... way up north." Said Chip. "Right on the other side of the Badlands."

"You're wearing a uniform and carrying a blaster, that makes you one of them." Said Camila.

"What's your name ?" Asked Maggie.

It seemed a natural thing to ask, but Camila was glaring at her. Chip was looking awkward too, as Hector put his hand on her shoulder. At that moment she understood why no one wanted an answer to that question. It was so much harder to kill someone if you knew their name.

"Elis miss, my full given name is Elis Dowds."

There, now she knew and with a name their prisoner was changed from about a hundred and forty pounds of meat, into a person, a human being.

"So Elis, how did you get the uniform and blaster ?" Asked Camila.

"It was just supposed to be a few weeks work for food, they had all sorts of tinned food. Once I was at the ranch it was different. I was put in uniform and became one of their soldiers, whether I liked it or not. Digging a few ditches for a tin of fruit became patrols and learning how to use a blaster."

"You learned well, nearly took my head off." Said Hector.

"This ranch place, is that what used to be called Base Omega ?" Asked Camila.

"There are signs from the old days calling it that, deep in the bunker. That's where all the food and weapons are, deep in the bunker. Everyone calls the place the ranch. They pretend to be some kind of army with a destiny to rule the world. Really they're just raiders who got lucky, finding all that food. Vincent believes in his destiny..... Always going on about it. The others ? They just want the food and blasters."

"Is Vincent the leader ?"

"Yeah, he's the one with the big idea about our destiny. When you're not with him you know it's all crap, but when he talks... You believe him."

"Does he have a second name ?"

"Probably, but I've never heard anyone use it. He's just Vincent to everyone. A lot of the ones who've been with him for a while think he's some sort of holy man. Me.... I just think he's a raider who got really lucky."

They'd found a few notes and odd items of personal stuff, but Camila had chosen just two, a notebook and a flare gun. She pushed them both slightly towards Elis.

"I'm assuming the other two crosses on the map in the notebook are other outposts?"

"Yeah, sent to the places where the track is the only way if you've got a heavy vehicle. There are all sorts of pathways through to the ranch, but you've got to use the track in a vehicle."

Camila held up the flare gun and the two extra cartridges that Chip had found, hidden under the driver's seat in the truck.

"We found no radio, no other way of contacting your people." Said Camila. "Is this all you had, something to send a flare if an enemy went past?"

"It's a bit primitive for an army destined to lead the world." Said Hector.

There was a look in his eyes, the same look he'd had when talking about Vincent. Maggie felt for her assault rifle, running her fingers over the trigger guard. She was beginning to get a bad feeling about Elis Dowds.

"Good enough, they knew you were coming." Said Elis. "You can't turn on the power at the food store bunker without them knowing. You messed with the computer and Vincent knew and went fucking ballistic. They know you're coming, though Vincent thought an army was on the way... Oh wow, if he'd known it was just you guys."

"Hey, we've kicked some weird creature ass." Said Chip.

"Yeah!" Agreed Maggie.

"Look, I've had nothing to eat for a day and nothing to drink since you captured me. Any chance of breakfast maybe? Or at least something to drink?"

He'd been friendly and helpful. Maggie wasn't surprised when Camila agreed.

"Food can wait a while, but you can have a drink now." She said.

It was just one of those things that it was Chip who went over to give Elis a drink. The young man was still bound at the wrists, so Chip had to hold the canteen right up to his mouth. They were friends though, there was no malice in Elis, none at all. They even shared a chuckle at Vincent thinking an entire army was on the way to attack him.

"How many soldiers does Vincent have?" Asked Camila.

"More than enough to kill you all."

He was quick, far too quick for Chip to avoid. Maggie gasped as Chip was forced to his knees, Elis's knee jammed into his back. Elis had the rope tying his wrists, tight around Chip's throat and he was pulling on it with all his strength. There had been something about Elis though, Maggie knew he was a believer in whatever destiny Vincent had foretold.

Maggie shot Elis with the rifle she'd already been holding. Two bullets, both in the side of his head. Once Chip stopped gasping for air she cried and carried on crying until Elis Dowds had been buried close to his friends.

"You had to Maggie.... He was going to kill me." Said Chip.

"I know.... I just need a while."

Maggie wasn't a stranger to sudden death in the Badlands, or the loss of people she knew. There had been old man Nolan, oldest inhabitant of Desperation for years. When cancer had made his life unbearable, he'd asked for someone to help ease him into the next world. No one bore a grudge against the man who'd done the deed, they all knew the brutal facts about life in the settlements. Maggie had cried and felt sad for days over the death of old man Nolan, but shooting Elis felt worse, far worse. She knew she'd feel better in a few days though.

They left that dreadful hilltop almost straight away, no one wanted to spend another night there. Roxy was once again in the APC's driving seat.

"We're going to travel only in the day from now on." She said. "I've spoken to Camila and we're going to try and use an old dried up creek, which is on the map we were given in Pile o' Bones. It'll be a tough and uncomfortable journey, but we'll avoid the other two outposts."

"Supposing there are hundreds of soldiers at this ranch?" Asked Maggie.

"We'll look it over and if we're outnumbered, we'll go back for reinforcements." Said Camila.

"Don't worry." Said Roxy. "These modern APCs can get almost anywhere. We'll get a look at the ranch and be gone again if it seems too dangerous."

~ ~

Bradford almost expected Maria to be waiting in the car park. It was quiet though, just half a dozen vehicles belonging to other residents in his block and a San Pablo Networks van. They installed and maintained the data comms everyone used, the link boxes everyone considered as essential as a supply of clean water and electricity.

"Home sweet home." He muttered, as he got off his bike.

Everything looked quiet and peaceful, unless you knew what to look for. A group of kids kicking the wall near the elevators, the boy and girl snogging on the walkway. Camila was away, so the Hyenas were more alert than usual. Not just the kids and the young lovers, there was an old guy sitting in a chair outside his apartment. All eyes and ears for the gang who protected the block. Anything strange going on and half a dozen armed Hyenas would arrive.

Bradford waved to the kids by the elevator and received a few waves back and the finger from one. He understood and accepted that he might run PD489 and be a friend of Camila's, but for many... He was still a cop. He opened the front door to his apartment and Amoe was there, huge but still gorgeous. They kissed of course, for longer and with more sincerity than the young lovers outside.

"Roland called and said you were on the way." Said Amoe.

"Did he say anything else?"

"No, just that everyone is a bit concerned about Camila. I saw Sofia yesterday and she thinks her mom has gone off on to avoid those pictures in Vogue."

"Yes, she'll probably turn up in a few weeks with a sun tan and a size ten hangover."

"How have you been Bradford?" She asked. "Have you seen any more of those watchers?"

"Yes and it saved my life again. I will tell Gillian about it, when I get back."

"Get back?"

"How is the baby doing?" He asked.

"Perfect.... Ideal size, ideal weight. Gillian even used a high tech scanner, the sort they use to look at the inside of reactors. All harmless to Rosa, but the pictures are amazing. Don't change the subject though....Get back from where?"

"Show me the pictures and I'll tell you."

They sat on the sofa and Amoe brought up a whole series of pictures on the big screen. Rosa was curled up, her eyes closed, but she looked like a real baby, perfect in every detail. None of the cloudy mess you got with ultrasound, just clear pictures of their child.

"She's beautiful." He said.

"Yep, definitely the best thing we've ever done.... Now about getting back?"

"Do you trust Gillian? I mean trust her completely?"

"Yes, though I didn't.... Now I trust her. I am trusting her, with our child's life. Why are you asking?"

He held her hand and kissed her cheek.

"It's Hector.... He's gone walkabout in the Badlands and Camila has gone to look for him. I'm worried they might both be heading into more trouble than they can handle. I want to go and find Hector, but only if you say it's alright. It means I might not be here when Rosa is born."

She was fidgeting, never a good sign.

"Hector.... You mean that Crowman guy ? Didn't he try to blow you up on Pandan Bridge ?"

"It is a relationship we both need to work on."

She was grinning at him and he knew she was going to say yes.

"My Bradford.... Always trying to save the entire world."

"I have tried to grow out of it."

She kissed him, a kiss that made him remember the post it note on the refrigerator. The note about how many months until they could enjoy some enthusiastic sex again.

"Don't ever change." Said Amoe. "I love you because you're always trying to save everyone."

~ ~

Allison Emily Chapman felt out of place on the PD489 VTOL. It was like the High School prom again, but far worse. Jules Schneider was there, though she now knew why everyone called him Sequel. His name was cool and he seemed a cool guy, apart from the look he kept giving her, the 'I want to kill you,' look. She had killed some PD489 operatives, but not knowingly. Another thing adding to her feeling of being out of place was the way everyone was wandering about. The VTOL was flying low and fast, hitting quite a bit of turbulence, yet no one was sat down and buckled up.

"This is a mad house." She mumbled.

"Probably.... I brought you this."

Bradford carrying a large and probably heavy Ion blaster.

"I wouldn't know how to use it.... And shouldn't everyone be seated ?"

"Oh, the turbulence you mean... We did have someone break a leg after bouncing about a bit, but that's the worst we've ever had. Take the blaster, I wouldn't mind betting you know how to use it." Allison did her best to ignore the floor moving about, as she took the blaster from him. It was heavy, but not too heavy for her to easily handle and carry about.

"No, I promise you I've never used one of these before, ever." She said.

"Try to do it without thinking. Check it out and turn it on.... Rely on your unconscious mind and muscle memory."

"Ok, but don't blame me if I drop it."

She didn't drop it. The skill came out of nowhere, probably training arranged by Dimitri. The power pack had been loosened, probably as a test. She gave it a slight twist and pushed it home, before turning the weapon on.

"I have no idea how I did that."

"My guess is you'll be good at using it too. It's yours now Allison. Enjoy the trip, Yasmine will be along later to get you fitted into a suit of body armour."

"I don't want body armour."

No good, he just smiled at her and wandered off towards the pilot. She heard him talking about not landing too close to Desperation, in case they agitated the locals.

There was a seat by the window. Of course there was, no one was sitting apart from the pilot and Gupta, who walked as though he'd injured his back. It really did feel like High School again, the time she'd been made to recite poetry to six hundred people. No one else was sitting, so Allison couldn't have sat in that window seat to save her life. Allison placed her new blaster on the seat. She

watched the world go by below, the houses beneath them, the roads full of cars. She had no idea where they were, but it obviously wasn't the Badlands.

"Hello, my name is Yasmine. We have met, but you might not remember me."

"Yes, you were there when I was arrested."

"Sorry, I didn't want to make you feel more uncomfortable."

"You can tell?"

"I feel the same way sometimes and can recognise it in others. I'm normally a scene of crime person, but sometimes I get to go on a mission like this. I often still feel like a square peg in a round hole though."

"And this business about ignoring turbulence." Said Allison.

"I know, it's all about gung ho bravado and the women are worse than the guys. One operative even had a leg broken by bouncing off the ceiling."

"I know, Bradford told me."

At last, a kindred spirit, though she knew the conversation would come round to making her feel like the outsider again.

"I'm here to get you kitted up Allison. Not my usual job, but we all multitask on a mission. You'll need to get into a suit of body armour before we get to Desperation."

"No, I'm happy as I am."

"Not optional I'm afraid.... Even Gupta wears armour and he stays onboard."

"What happened to him?" Asked Allison.

Her new friend gave Gupta a sad look and sighed.

"That.... Was probably my fault. Look Allison you have to wear body armour if you want to leave the aircraft once we land. Not having any isn't like losing your virginity, you can't lie about it."

"Sorry, I'm happy as I am."

"Fair enough, but you'll be stuck here with Gupta for hours. He'll tell you how it was all my fault that we split up, how awfully I treated him. Worst of all he'll keep going on about how he still loves me. Do you want hours of that?"

"Fine, you convinced me. Do we do it now?"

"When you're ready, I'll be in the repair bay at the rear."

"Ok, I'll look out of the window for a bit longer and then find you."

"Sorry, but it's a screen Allison. We all call them windows and think of them as windows, but they're screens picking up the view from sensors and cameras. Outside is just a smooth and very tough bulletproof hull... And I've made you feel out of place again, sorry."

"No, I need to know these things. I'll be along to get my armour in a few minutes."

As Allison made her way to the rear of the VTOL, they hit a bad area of turbulence. Instinctively she was up on her toes, knees bent, rolling with the movement. One of the PD489 soldiers stumbled and hit the wall, but she'd remained on her feet. Another gift from Dimitri and his trainers? It was irritating to not remember so much of her life, but also exciting to constantly discover new talents.

~

~