

## Bradford II – Badlands

### Chapter 1 – Pandan

**‘Schneider was three years dead and Bradford could only ever remember having one proper conversation with him and that had been after drinking far too much Devils Promise. It was when Bradford had been spending a lot of time with Amoe and rumours were spreading.**

**“Nothing wrong with letting a good woman domesticate you a little.” Schneider had told him. “No children though, until you’re ready for a desk job. I’ve seen it so many times. A man gets a family and something goes out of him, like a light being turned off. Women civilise a man Bradford, often for his own good. Children though.... They cut his balls off and turn him into a pussy.”**

**For some reason that conversation had stuck in his mind and as Amoe was now six months into her pregnancy, it seemed stuck in his dreams too. Not that he felt any different yet and Schneider had hardly been an authority on civilised behaviour. The baby was going to be a girl and Amoe had already set her heart on the name Rosa.’**

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Pandan Bridge was eventually going to connect the main island of San Pablo with several smaller islands, starting with Marshall’s Island, a little over a mile away. Two suspension spans, linked on a manmade island halfway across. It was the largest and most ambitious construction project in the entire history of San Pablo.

“Linking the farming communities to the main island, will secure our food supply in bad weather and make the islands truly a part of our nation.” President Herbert had told the people.

It would also allow the wealthy to travel to homes on the islands without getting out of their chauffeur driven cars, though that was rarely mentioned. It would also encourage the overcrowded population of San Pablo City to spread out and that definitely wasn’t mentioned in the tour. The quiet and tranquil atmosphere of the islands was never going to be the same, once the vast bridge was open for traffic. Bradford had taken Amoe for one of the regular Sunday tours of the bridge construction site.

“All the eight hundred foot high towers are completed.” Said the woman giving the tour. “Now cables are being strung, thousands of miles of them.”

It was already a marvel, the line of towers stretching out to what looked like the horizon. Quite a few cables had already been run the entire mile to Marshall’s Island.

“It will be a huge balancing act between the cables and the weight of hundreds of trucks and cars.”

Said the tour guide. “A balancing act that will create a safe bridge for the next two hundred years.”

“What do we do then ?” Shouted a joker from the audience.

It was a good tour of what looked likely to be called the 1<sup>st</sup> wonder of the New Worlds, the worlds left after the great disasters that ended with the nuclear exchange in Asia. There was no Asia now, or so he’d heard and precious little left of America after the floods.

The local police found him, while Amoe was buying a plastic model bridge in the souvenir shop.

“I’m off duty. Call my office, we’ve a whole team waiting for this type of call.”

“We did and they’re on their way.”

“So why ruin my weekend ?” Bradford asked.

They did have the decency to look awkward, but they weren’t going away.

“Any threat from a known terrorist is reported to the president’s office, especially if the suspect is carrying a bomb. We were given the position of your phone and told to find you.”

“The president told us to find you.” Said the other cop.

Bradford had been tempted to ask the president of what, but it was an old line from a very old film. Gupta would have laughed, Gupta understood nearly all of his classic movie references.

“You know the terrorist.”

“Who is it ?” He asked.

“He calls himself Crowman.”

“I know Crowman, real name Hector Pérez. I’ll need some kit and the loan of a weapon.”

He’d extracted a promise from Amoe that she’d wait in the car park, while he did what had to be done. Of course being a cop, she’d wanted to help, or least stay close enough to see what was going on.

“I’ll work better knowing that you and Rosa are safe.”

The Pandan police had run him out in a police launch to the manmade island, where the two separate half mile long bridge spans met. If you had a bomb and wanted to destroy the bridge in style, the island was the place to go.

“Is Hector working alone ?” He asked. “How did he get past security ?”

The local cop did at least have the decency to look embarrassed.

“The bridge is still under construction, so we thought..... Anyway it’s Sunday and getting people to come in is difficult. As far as we can tell, Crowman is on his own.”

Sunday, when every cop in Pandan wanted to take his family to church. Bradford had heard those kinds of excuses before. He was sure a large number of disasters had started with ‘Anyway, it’s Sunday.’ No point in the giving the local cops a hard time, the president was almost certain to invite quite a few of them to resign.

“There is a construction elevator, which still goes up to about six hundred feet.” One of the cops told him. “Crowman used it and then took to the ladders. He’s almost at the top.”

The elevator was exposed on the side of the huge tower and Crowman took a few shots at them. All of his blaster shots went wide.

“Difficult to aim a blaster and carry a bomb.” Said Bradford.

The cops went up to where the elevator stopped and waited under the shelter of a recess in the tower wall. That was obviously as far as they were willing to go. Not that he blamed them, no local cop was paid enough to be a hero.

“Can I borrow another blaster ?” He asked. “Just in case.”

No Kevlar with carbon fibre in the mix, or his personal PD489 weapons. They kitted him out with an old stab vest and two obsolete blasters. Bradford didn’t moan, he knew it was the best kit they had.

“Good luck.” Said four Pandan cops, at almost the same time.

The ladders were steel and fixed into the concrete tower wall. Luckily it was a hot dry day; the steel rungs would be slippery and lethal in the rain. Bradford tried to keep close to the wall, as he climbed the ladders at a brisk pace.

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Gupta Saunders was still officially off active duty. The damage to his back and shoulder had been extensive and although the military doctors were good, they couldn’t work miracles. Three years after nearly getting himself killed and he still had nightmares and pains if he slept in the wrong position. Not that officially being a desk jockey was much of a handicap in PD489.

“I’m creating a new role.” Bradford had told him. “Comms link Officer. Your skills make you ideal for the job and there’s a slight salary bump to go with the title.”

Bradford had actually winked at him.

“Of course the job will entail going out on missions with the team.”

Gupta was last man onboard, the one left to guard their transport and keep everyone in touch with base. Officially he only picked up a weapon and joined the battle in an emergency. In truth, he had often picked up a blaster and joined the fight for the hell of it.

“Half an hour from target.” He shouted. “I know it’s Sunday, but wake up guys and double check each other’s kit.”

Sunday, or Domingo en San Pablo as the large catholic population of Pandan liked to call it. Sundays were famous, or infamous, for being the day when procrastination was the order of the day.

“But..... It’s Sunday.”

He’d heard as everyone had boarded the large double rotor helicopter. Gupta wasn’t surprised that terrorists had chosen Sunday to attack the new bridge, though he was surprised the local cops had been quite so incompetent.

“It’ll all be over by the time we get there.” Said Chet. “Bradford will be sat there, holding the bomb and asking why we took so long.”

Chet was a new guy, there were quite a few of those lately. PD489 was still a secret organisation, but there had been more than a few rumours about their existence for several years. A special report on a late night chat show had turned them from hinted about rumour, to rock stars. President Herbert had condemned the TV show as foolish and likely to put officers at risk. All nonsense of course, as Bradford had told him it was Herbert who had leaked most of the information to the programme.

‘PD489 – Not in my name!’

Intended as a hatchet job to turn the public against the secretive military force who were thought to be the president’s ‘pest control,’ tasked with keeping the subversives under control. The people of San Pablo liked what they saw though, as had most of the printed media. From being a hidden organisation, PD489 was able to step out into the light, just a little.

Their headquarters building now had a small brass plaque near the outside door, with PD489 etched into it in tasteful italics. Even their helicopters now carried a ‘PD489’ logo. President Herbert had approved far better funding and people from other branches of San Pablo security services, were queuing up to join them. Chet was a transfer from the president’s own protection team.

“Crap ! We really are rock stars.”

Roland had said, when the transfer request had come in. Gupta wasn’t sure if being put on a very high pedestal was a good thing. It was a long way to fall, when the inevitable screw up happened.

“I have Bradford’s communicator ident on the screen.” He yelled. “Get ready people.”

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The weather seemed a little different about fifty feet from the top of the tower. The wind had picked up and it was a cool wind. Bradford liked to pride himself on keeping in good shape, but the cooling wind was welcome after climbing hundreds of rungs on the ladders. He briefly looked straight down and regretted it.

“Oh fuck, that’s a long way down.” He muttered.

If asked, he’d have said he was alright with heights. There was a difference though, between going up a ladder to clear out the guttering and being on a tower eight hundred feet from the ground. He could see for miles, cars now appeared to be no more than dots on the ground. It was doing something to his senses, like motion sickness, or so he told himself. Bradford hung onto the steel rung in front of him, waiting for the nausea to clear. He heard a man’s voice yelling from above, though the wind was making the words meaningless. A blaster fired, though he had no idea where Crowman had been aiming.

“Damn Hector, of all the people to go rogue.” He muttered.

He knew Crowman well, though usually by his real name of Hector Pérez. Hector had actually been rounded up with the survivors of Samuel’s people, after the events at the Juniper Hotel. The almost messianic Samuel dead, his followers went into a sort of emotional meltdown. Some had been angry and feeling let down by the whole Dysto-Guerra terrorist movement. PD489 used that anger, turning many into informers and even assassins, to kill several prominent people in the many disparate subversive groups. Most of the newly converted informers died fairly quickly or simply became loyal terrorists again. Hector had been different.

“You killed Samuel and took his strength.” Hector had told him once. “I am yours to command now.” Easy words to say, but Hector had delivered, time and time again. Until there was a period of three months with no contact from their most successful informer. Bradford hadn’t been directly controlling Crowman by then and his handler hadn’t been good at keeping everyone up to date. PD489 had been overworked and under resourced then; quite a lot of important information had fallen through the gaps. It was six months before Bradford started looking for Hector and by then, the trail had gone cold. Now it seemed that Crowman was back and he had a bomb. Why now though and who had given him a bomb ?

“Only one way to find out.”

Ideally he wanted to keep both hands and both feet on the rungs of the ladder, but he also needed to have his blaster in his hand. Arriving at the top with no more than a cheery smile to greet Hector, was likely to mean a lot of screaming and falling to his death in the ocean below. Bradford put his entire left arm through the ladder rung and felt for his blaster.

“Crap ! I am ok with heights, I am ok with heights.....”

He’d looked down again, it was almost impossible not to. The ground looked so far away and he felt a real urge to let go and rush down to join it. The sensation was almost hypnotic, until he thought of Amoe bringing poor Rosa up on her own. He closed his eyes and used his right hand to find his blaster, enjoying the hum as his thumb flicked off the safety catch. His old borrowed blaster was now ready to use.

“Someone up there definitely hates me.”

His personal phone and his PD489 communicator were both making the vaguely melodic noise, which meant Gupta was trying to contact him. Crap ! Gupta had to realise that hanging onto a ladder hundreds of feet above the ground and carrying a blaster used up all the hands he had. Bradford ignored the noise and climbed up to within a few feet of the top.

“..... bastard..... left me for dead..... now you’ll pay.....”

The wind was picking up and getting cooler, hinting at bad weather on the way. Bradford caught enough of Hector’s ranting to get the gist of what was pissing him off. Leaving Hector to whatever had befallen him had been more of a clerical blunder than anything else, but he did have cause to think PD489 had failed him.

“Hector..... Can we talk about this ?” He yelled.

The answer was two blaster shots, one from close and the second from further away. As he wasn’t screaming and falling to his death, Bradford assumed they’d both missed him. The top of the tower was long and wide, far wider than it looked from the ground. Bradford took a chance and looked over the top of the ladder. There was machinery, quite a lot of it, all invisible from the ground below. He saw Crowman at the far end of the tower, carrying a large blue bag over his shoulder and about to hide behind one of the cable runners.

“That looks a heavy bag old friend.” He mumbled. “I bet that was fun to carry up the ladders.”

Bradford could also see a thick mist approaching across the ocean from the west. A way off yet, but its arrival would turn an already suicidal mission into an impossible one. Bradford fired his blaster in the general direction of Crowman and went over the top, running for the nearest cover.

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President Otis Herbert had been enjoying a quiet Sunday at home, after the obligatory service at his local church. Religion seemed to go through waves of fashion, like short skirts and flared jeans. Now religion was in fashion again, with seventy percent of the population of San Pablo attending church every Sunday. Otis wasn't really a believer, but only a fool risks offending that many voters. Currently he was sat in the office at the rear of the presidential mansion.

"Sorry to get you in, but I wanted to get your feel on the reports coming in." He said. "Loner or something more serious and of course.... Why the name Crowman?"

Maria Gonsalves now ran the Department for Military Intelligence, as Bradford had predicted many years before. She dealt with intelligence from all of government, even the data from mass surveillance of public communications of all kinds. She currently controlled the largest budget and headcount in the security services of San Pablo. Though for some reason unclear even to herself, she still missed being an operative of PD489.

"Hector Pérez was one of our successes at turning subs into informers." She said. "Assassin too, he was good with a knife when required. The name Crowman was given to him in part by the infamous Samuel himself. Samuel Marroquín had a thing about giving people animal code names and Hector was called Crow. It stuck and everyone knew him as Crowman."

"So why has he turned on us Maria? More importantly is he a lone crazy guy or running with one of the major terrorist groups?"

She had no real idea, but the president never wanted to hear that answer. Just about everyone in his inner circle had been given a verbal beating, for saying they simply didn't know, when asked a direct question. Maria was now part of that inner circle and she'd learned to give answers that left significant wriggle room, if things went pear shaped.

"He only really wanted to work for Bradford and became difficult when he was passed onto a specialist handler. He still performed well though, his intelligence was always pure gold." She replied. "Then almost exactly two years ago, Hector vanished. My best guess is that someone suspected he was an informer and he was being held somewhere out in the Badlands and having his fingernails pulled out. All the time probably waiting for Bradford to come and rescue him."

"Only Bradford never did rescue him." Said Herbert.

Oh that voice, the voice reputed to have won him a record number of presidential elections.

Someone had once likened it to molasses poured over a nice ripe melon. Maria was half in love with that voice, most women she knew were. It wasn't a voice you could lie to.

"No he didn't sir, or rather we didn't. No excuses, but it was a bad time for our department. Lots of good people lost and new replacements to be trained. Plus the investigation into the disappearance of Kealani Lee was still taking up a lot of resources."

"Yes, yes Amoe's father. I do remember that he was never found. Bad times Maria, very bad times."

"They were sir and we let Hector down, no excuses, no other way to put it. Communications weren't as good as they should have been and by the time anyone began looking for Hector..... It was too late. I think everyone assumed he was dead."

President Herbert was looking straight into her eyes.

"So you're saying he's on some kind of personal vendetta?"

Crap ! How to get wriggle room out of such a direct question. She liked Herbert, but she was under no illusions about how ruthless he could be. You were allowed one major mistake, but making a second led to a demotion so far down the ranks that you might as well resign. She'd seen it happen to quite a few people, including the guy who'd been doing her current job.

"Yes, I do sir."

There, she'd said it. Carrying on to explain why was going to be far easier.

"Hector almost worshipped Samuel as a God. Then along came Bradford and killed his God. To Hector that meant transferring all his adoration to the man strong enough to kill his God. Hector didn't almost worship Bradford, he genuinely thought of Bradford as someone more than human."

"Hmmm with the modifications LabSinc4 had given Bradford, he wasn't wrong."

"Yes sir, he recognised something special about Bradford. Then the man he worshipped left him to be tortured and killed. It's all assumptions of course and we may never know how Hector escaped, but....."

Herbert was waving his hand at her to shut up. Once she was quiet he looked straight up at the ceiling for a good five minutes. Eventually he looked at her again.

"I agree with you Maria." He said. "For now we'll let this play out as one lone crazy guy with an axe to grind."

Maria just prayed that she hadn't just committed the one huge crap fest of a mistake she was allowed, before her career vanished.

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Hector, Crowman or whatever he was calling himself now, was still too far away to talk to. Not that the distance and the wind stopped him from shouting insults at Bradford.

"If it turns out you're carrying a bag of laundry Hector, I might just shoot you for the hell of it."

Bradford muttered to himself.

His phone and communicator began to demand his attention again. Bradford chose the communicator, it had military grade encryption. Not that anything provided a guaranteed private conversation.

"Hello Gupta, hell of a Sunday. Are you close?"

"A mile downwind and running on full stealth. The bad guys won't hear us until we're on top of them."

"There is only one bad guy and knowing Hector, he might not even have a bomb."

"Really?"

There was actually disappointment in Gupta's voice. Bradford put it down to no one wanting their Sunday ruined for a false alarm.

"I'd say it's fifty-fifty." Said Bradford. "Stay back for a few minutes, while I try and reason with him."

The fast approaching mist now looked like fog, there wasn't time to sit around and make an informed choice. Bradford looked towards where he'd seen Hector run for cover. He'd intended to fire two or three shots from his blaster, to get Hector's attention, but they were there again, a male one this time. A man in the standard street attire of San Pablo, just standing about halfway across the tower, simply watching.

"Crap ! Real I could cope with." Bradford mumbled. "Please don't let me finally be going crazy."

This was the six or seventh in the last three years. Actually the eighth when he thought about it.

Always just one and always looking so ordinary.

"Always when the situation is dangerous." He'd told Camila.

He'd only ever told Camila about those he saw. Amoe would have worried and obviously no one at PD489 could know. It would get out and President Herbert would hardly let a guy who saw things run San Pablo's covert pest control force. Camila was fine, she had her own dark past and a few current things to hide. Bradford knew that Camila was still his loyal friend, but she also controlled the street crime in 7 East Central. Plus she believed in an old religion, mixed in with Christianity to form a chimera of the two.

"I think her version of Christianity predates the birth of Jesus." He'd once joked with Amoe.

Camila had gone quite pale, when he'd told her about the silent watchers. She'd said a prayer over him when they'd first met, something in old Spanish from before the whole world changed. She'd spoken it again, as she shook her head.

"Does anyone else see them?" She'd asked.

"No. One was watching a shootout and everyone just walked past her as though she wasn't there. Am I going nuts?"

"What you see is real Bradford and you need to be careful. For some truly great warriors, the Gods send messengers to bring their souls to them after death in battle."

He'd wanted to laugh at the idea of Valkyries dressed in the current fashion trends, but Camila's attitude forced him to take it seriously. The still and quiet watchers might be useful, if they were telling him things were getting really dangerous. Bradford ignored the watcher as best he could and fired three shots in the general direction of Crowman.

"Hey! Have you even got a bomb?" He yelled.

He wasn't expecting an answer, just the half dozen blaster shots that clanged and thudded into the machinery he was hiding behind. It was an old trick that usually worked, unless the bad guy had another blaster ready. Bradford hoped Hector's blaster was busy recharging, as he ran past the silent watcher and crouched behind a cable winch, just ten feet from Hector.

"Yeah I've got a bomb Bradford. Want to come over and look at it?"

"Only if you promise not to shoot me."

"I promise."

"Something makes me doubt your sincerity. I heard your mother died. I'm truly sorry Hector, she was a nice lady."

"And because of you I missed her funeral."

Mothers are the one person you can usually guarantee will never turn on their kids. Bradford had visited the Pérez house on many occasions to talk to her son, usually late at night. Aleja Pérez had always made him feel... Maybe not welcome, but she'd always offered him food and drink. He wasn't about to tell Hector that his mother was the one likely to have marked him as a traitor, a rat. "We both know that you made the decision to run with Samuel and his people." Said Bradford. "That was your choice and no one else's. That decision led you to whatever hell you've been through, not me."

Bradford knew a long and highly abusive reply was on the way. He didn't wait to listen to all of it. As Hector began to get inventive with his language, Bradford went round the side of the cable pulleys and shot him in the right shoulder. Knowing that his opponent was good with a knife in either hand, he then stamped hard on his left hand.

"Jeez Bradford, there was no need....."

"Life isn't fair Hector. Just be grateful the blaster I borrowed is old and cauterised the wound in your shoulder. The new ones leave a wound that bleeds out."

"Crowman, everyone calls me Crowman."

Bradford tied Hector's wrists and ankles with plastic ties and went through all his pockets. An incident where Maria hadn't thought a suspect needed binding, had left a scar. Quite literally, a scar a good two inches long on his back. Once he was certain Hector was no longer a threat, he examined the blaster that had been fired at him so many times.

"Crap Hector, this blaster is older than the one the cops lent me. At least Samuel made sure all his people had state of the art weapons. Who are you running with now?"

No answer, so Bradford picked up the bag that might or might not contain a bomb, placing it flat on the ground.

"As for the Crowman crap.....You just seem more of a Hector. Hey, you really did have a bomb."

It was under a pile of laundry, a long and nasty looking bomb inside a blue plastic shell. It looked sophisticated, with a timer that hadn't been set and a large switch with 'Activate' written above it. Someone had given Hector one hell of a bomb and they'd been sensible enough to give it clearly marked controls an idiot could follow.

"Who gave you this Hector?"

Silence combined with a sullen expression. Good news though, the silent watcher had gone, so it didn't look as though he was in danger of dying that day. He used his communicator.

"Come in and pick us up Gupta. Lone terrorist and his bomb are both safe."

"So he had a bomb?"

"Yes, a nasty one."

Bradford left the bomb alone, for someone back at base with more skill in such things to examine.

"Talk to me or you'll go to the interrogators Hector. Who gave you the bomb?"

Everyone knew the PD489 interrogators, with their drugs and hypodermic needles, could do far worse than any torture Hector might have suffered. Still Hector said nothing.

"Silence huh? Another bad choice Hector old friend."

The helicopter hovered rather than trying to land on the top of the tower. He knew most of his team leaders now, though PD489 employed too many people for him to remember everyone's names.

Chet seemed disappointed by something, as he picked up the bag containing the bomb.

"You didn't say it..... I just knew you'd say it."

"Say what Chet?"

"Why we took so long to arrive."

"Yeah, why did you guys show up late?"

Chet looked happy and there were smiles all round, as they shoved Crowman onto the helicopter.

Bradford found a quiet corner, or as quiet as any corner can be in a military helicopter. He pressed the icon on his phone which had a picture of Amoe on it.

"Hi, it's over, but I'll need to go back with my team. Will you be ok?" He asked.

"Yes, just get home tonight.... Don't make it an all-nighter at that place."

"I won't, I promise."

Amoe never asked him why it always seemed to be him leading the charge, though he knew she must be wondering. He had hundreds of people to send against whatever or whoever might threaten the good people of San Pablo. Yet he kept getting into situations where he might easily be killed or maimed. It was his life though and he loved it. Luckily fate had sent him a wife who understood him, perhaps a bit too well.

"Was there a bomb?"

"Yes, but it was never activated or the timer set."

"That's something to be grateful for... I'll wait up...."

“I love you and the bump.” He said.

“Love you too.”

She was chuckling as he ended the call, the atmosphere between them relieved a little. He’d try to take less risks, it was only fair to Amoe and the bump they intended to call Rosa. Fate was the problem though, it kept throwing dangerous situations at him. A tour of the new Pandan Bridge construction should have been a pleasant day on the coast.

Bradford looked up and realised everyone apart from the pilot, was grinning at him. Crap ! He’d used the L word in front of his people. His operatives were roughly men and women in equal numbers, but even the women were smirking at him.

“We love you too boss.” Said Chet.

“Crap... Wake me when we get to the office.”

He leant against the vibrating wall of the noisy craft and pretended to sleep. Strangely he was feeling guilt for getting involved in incidents that might leave Amoe to bring up Rosa on her own. Yet he’d never felt the slightest guilt about killing Amoe’s father, before dumping the body down a hole out in the Badlands. He’d expected to feel a need to tell her. He’d expected to be tortured by guilt, for killing the father of the woman he loved. No, he’d never felt the slightest urge to beat himself up over it. Kealani Lee had been a total bastard and killing him had been justified. Maybe not legal or something he wanted the world to know about, but definitely justified.

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