

Bradford II – Badlands

Chapter 20 - Rosa

“Maggie had learned the whole routine from Bob of course, the whole sharpshooter thing about never missing. She was genuinely a decent shot though and getting better all the time. The fifty calibre had a tendency to bounce about on its mount, but she was learning how to compensate for that.”

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Gillian McBride looked at the results from the scanner and knew it was what she'd been dreading since learning that Amoe was pregnant. There was something wrong and it wasn't going to be a straightforward birth.

“Who has the bloodwork ?” She yelled. “I need to see the bloodwork.”

She had two experienced midwives in the room and the leading obstetrician in San Pablo. Bullying them wasn't going to achieve much, but it was how she dealt with stress. Amoe's personal doctor was on the way too. With Tamara there'd five of them in the high tech delivery room, six if you included Amoe.

“Just enough to form our own volleyball team.” She muttered.

There were too many people and they should have had a rehearsal. The tech in the room was state of the art, but it was all designed for research, most of it military research. The obstetrics expert was still learning what buttons to push.

“Sorry..... There, it should be on the screen now.” He said.

Damn, Amoe's red cell count was dropping. It wasn't at the point where a transfusion was needed, it was just bad enough to cause concern. Everything had been perfect for so long. There had been a slight blood pressure problem, though not bad enough to call eclampsia. Gillian knew that Mother Nature could be merciless when it came to ensuring the health of the next generation. The baby was always given priority over the mother.

“Might be a slight internal bleed.” Said a midwife.

Gillian looked at the lipid levels in Amoe's blood and they were low too, though not dangerously so. Baby Rosa wasn't doing it deliberately of course, but she was taking what she needed from mum's body. Gillian had almost forgotten Amoe was there, wide awake and looking worried.

“Don't worry Amoe, Rosa's heartbeat is strong and regular.” Said Gillian. “Your baby is doing just fine.”

“Will she be born soon ?”

“Rosa will make her appearance when she's ready. I think it will be soon though.”

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Maggie had learned the whole routine from Bob of course, the whole sharpshooter thing about never missing. She was genuinely a decent shot though and getting better all the time. The fifty calibre had a tendency to bounce about on its mount, but she was learning how to compensate for that.

“I think I got one of them.” She shouted. “Yes..... I can see him on the ground.”

“Keep your head down and be careful Mags.” Said Roxy. “Their buddies will be after you now, concentrating fire on the turret.”

It was as if they'd heard her, as the bullets and blaster fire began to hit the armoured sides of the turret. Maggie did keep her head down, but she also kept firing back at them.

"Someone will be waking up the guy with the rocket launcher." Said Hector. "They are bound to have a guy with a rocket launcher, or a rail gun on the back of his truck. We need to move and keep moving."

"I tend to agree with him." Said Camila.

Roxy was still driving, probably the best APC driver they had, she'd definitely clocked up more driving hours than any of the others. Maggie expected to be replaced in the turret, probably by Cruz. She was pleased when Camila patted her leg.

"You're doing well Mags, keep it up."

The APC moved forward, Roxy keeping to their usual speed. Fast enough to be out of the way if the enemy tried to set up a trap, yet slow enough to be careful. Maggie saw a dark coloured jacket moving between the trees and fired. She was rewarded by hearing a grenade bounce off the turret, before exploding on the road behind them.

"Damn, these guys mean business." Said Cruz.

"Did they give you a rating card when you hired this thing Camila?" Asked Roxy.

"Yeah, I remember it being H35 D14, it can take just about anything."

It was frustrating being up in the turret and not able to see everyone, though Maggie could hear them well enough. All the enemy seemed to be wearing dark black clothing, which wasn't ideal in a forest of green leaves. Maggie found another target, though she closed her eyes when she saw the spirt of blood.

"I bet that was the manufacturer's rating." Said Hector. "They're always way too optimistic. Look at the terms and conditions you signed and you'll find you signed away your right to sue them, or take part in a class action. Do you have the rating card? The tested rating issued by the military is always in the small print on the back."

Maggie could hear rummaging below her, as Camila dug around in the locker where the first aid kit was kept.

"I knew the card was in there.... Crap, you're right Hector." Said Camila. "The test rating is H25, but.... Jeezzzz Just D5."

They weren't ignoring her of course, it just felt like it.

"Will someone tell me." Yelled Maggie. "What does all that mean?"

"It means this tin can isn't as strong as it should be." Said Cruz.

"How bad is it?" Asked Chip.

"The APC has a soft underside." Said Hector. "Fine as long as we keep moving, but if we get stuck somewhere... They could burn us out with just a couple of firebombs. The good news of course is that they don't know that."

The enemy seemed to have decided to keep further away, none of them offering a target for the fifty calibre. There was the occasional burst of blaster fire, which did no harm at all to the outer armour of the APC. Hector had to ruin everything of course, by tempting fate.

"There..... the forest is ending." He said. "We've made it past the worst."

Maybe there were mischievous deities, looking to punish such words. Maggie would never have said such a thing.

"Doesn't look good." Said Roxy. "Three trucks, lots of armed guys in black uniforms and they're not even bothering to get under cover."

The forest ended and the track passed between a lake on the left and a steep hill on the right. Their enemy knew the local geography, it was their territory. Two of the trucks were parked either side of the track, effectively stopping any chance of the APC simply barging its way through. As for the third truck, Roxy was the first to see what was being uncovered by several busy enemy fighters.

"They've got a railgun... Long barrel." She said. "That'll strip the outer hardening off our armour in no time."

"Are they close enough to hit, Mags?" Asked Camila.

"I'll try."

The range was fine, the weapon could easily hit the truck, accuracy was the problem. The mounting was homemade, the 50 calibre larger than the smaller blaster intended to be used. Maggie fired three shots before hitting the truck, eight before one of the enemy fell over, presumed dead. By then the long barrel railgun was firing at them. Its slugs hitting the outside of the APC sounded like wicked, angry raindrops.

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Bobby Laszlo realised he was panicking after his driver had exceeded the speed limit for about three blocks. He'd be allowed into the PD489 building of course, he was now an official consultant with a laminated ID card in his pocket. Gillian would never let him in the maternity room though and anyway.... It might all be a false alarm.

"Slow down Emilio..... Do you know anywhere round here to buy some fruit?"

"Yes boss, though it's nothing fancy."

The shop sold a good selection, though there were no baskets of fruit and Bobby had set his heart on buying Amoe the biggest in the shop. Emilio remembered a florist nearby that sold flowers in baskets.

"Really bright flowers boss..... Tropical stuff from near Pandan."

It took over an hour to buy the flowers and a basket of fruit large enough to feed a whole hospital. The time spent on choosing fruit and blooms had probably been a good idea, Bobby felt far less stressed as he entered the PD489 building carrying a huge bunch of exotic blooms. Emilio followed him, carrying the triple XL sized basket of fruit.

There were no armed guards outside the research labs, but the outer door was solid and firmly locked. His card came up with a green light on the reader, but the doors refused to open. It didn't surprise him, he knew that Gillian was taking her role as the guardian of the unborn Rosa, very seriously. He pressed the button next to the doors and heard a buzzing sound somewhere in the distance.

"It looks like we wait." He told Emilio.

There was a row of chairs for those not lucky enough to have an ID card that gave access to the research labs. Gillian arrived after about ten minutes, without the usual scowl when she saw it was him. It was a first, Gillian McBride actually chuckling.

"I love the fruit Bobby, couldn't you have found a bigger basket?"

"How is she? Is it her time.....Is she giving birth?" He asked.

"Amoe is very close to giving birth Bobby. It might help her to see you, though you only get five minutes. Stay longer and I will get you thrown out of the building."

"Understood Gillian, five minutes is all I get..... Can I bring the fruit?"

"Errmmm... Really everything should go through decon."

It was as if she'd reconsidered, the rare smile was there again.

"The flowers can come with you, she'll like those." Said Gillian. "We've a proper waiting room set up. Your driver and the fruit can wait there for now."

They were at the door to the newly setup maternity room, before he asked the question that had been worrying him.

"Is she alright Gillian ? Being early and everything.... The cabbie said she looked unwell."

"Ahh yes, I'd forgotten about you having Bradford's place under surveillance. One day he might actually have you arrested for that. Amoe is fine and about to give birth to a healthy baby girl. Don't forget Bobby..... Five minutes and you leave."

"It's not really surveillance....."

He never did finish the sentence. Bobby had imagined a sick looking Amoe, her legs up on stirrups, her arms full on cannulas. Instead Amoe was propped up on pillows and she looked well. Her face was a little pale perhaps, but she was smiling at him.

"Bobby, how wonderful..... You've come to be with me."

Someone helped him clear a spot on a bedside cabinet for the flowers. They definitely helped to soften the sterile look of all the medical tech. He kissed Amoe on the forehead and gave her a hug.

"I've been given five minutes." He said. "I brought fruit too, once it's been through decon."

"No, you can't go Bobby." Said Amoe. "I need a hand to squeeze, someone to shout and swear at when it gets painful.... I've heard it's traditional when giving birth."

"Well, I'd love to of course....."

"Out of the question, completely inappropriate." Snapped Gillian.

"Don't be silly Gillian..... Bobby has seen my private bits before."

He saw Gillian wince and knew that Amoe was enjoying torturing her a little.

"We've little space with the medical team in here Amoe." Said Gillian. "The last thing we need is an..... Onlooker."

"Nonsense Gillian..... It is the birth of my child, so it's my choice who stays for the birth. Bobby is staying."

Bobby wasn't that keen on the idea, but didn't have the courage to tell her. He held Amoe's hand and hoped it was going to be a routine birth, completely straightforward. Gillian seemed to know she was beaten.

"Fine, Bobby can stay....But I'm going to make sure he's cleaned and disinfected."

There was a look in Gillian's eyes that made him nervous. Bobby suspected the cleaning and disinfecting was going to be the medical equivalent of a punishment beating.

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Allison sat in the seat next to Gupta, watching the various alerts and scanner screens that he couldn't. Gupta was flying the VTOL well, as long as he didn't have to worry about things like long range radar and close range scanners. The pilot was in the main cabin, given something to make him sleep after his ruined legs became too painful to tolerate.

"You fly this thing pretty well Gupta." She said.

"As long as I've got nothing else to worry about. I'm dreading having to use the radio."

"I'll stay here and help you, it's far better than being.... Back there." She said. "I'm still not exactly flavour of the month."

"Give them time, they take a while to warm to newcomers."

"How long..... On average ?" She asked.

"Twenty years should do it."

"That's what I figured Gupta. You fly and I'll do the radio and watch the scanners."

They were flying high, the scanners looking ahead could see well beyond their range of accuracy. They were finding something going on seven miles in front of them, but were unable to say what it was.

“Something is happening seven miles ahead of us.”

“What is it ?” Asked Gupta.

“Not sure yet.”

Gradually the scanners made sense of the data coming from the ground below. Just before they were five miles away from what they were looking at, the onboard AI became certain about what it was seeing.

“Plasma weapons fire at five miles Gupta.” She said. “A high voltage source too, first modern tech we’ve seen below us.”

“Could you..... Tell the others ?”

She had to carefully lean over his left hand to pick up the microphone.

“We have weapons fire five miles ahead. I repeat, we have weapons fire five miles ahead of us.”

There was only a thin partition behind them, she could hear the commotion as everyone began to gather up their weapons and equipment. Within two minutes Bradford had the door open and was leaning into the cockpit.

“What’s happening ?” He asked.

“Plasma weapons on the ground at five miles and a high voltage source.” She said. “My guess would be that someone is using a railgun, a big one.”

“It’ll be Camila and Hector, bound to be.” Said Bradford. “Take us down nice and low Gupta, if they need help we need to be low enough to give it.”

He was looking right at her, as if making a decision.

“Can you use our railguns Allison ?” He asked.

“I’m a quick learner.”

“Good, because we must only be four miles away by now.... Get learning.”

Bradford left, leaving her with a stick in front of her with a fire button on it. That much was fairly easy and obvious, could have been understood by a toddler. It became harder when she put on the helmet which controlled both side railguns. Allison now had red buttons in front of her eyes and two cross hairs on the screen.

“Crap Gupta, we’re flying low.” She muttered.

“I’ll slow us down a little, but you won’t have long to pick a target.”

Most of the buttons the weapons system was showing her were fairly obvious. There was a button with deployed written above it, which had a cross through it. Her index finger reached out to press the button and she heard the railguns extend and come to life.

“So far, so good.” She muttered.

Another button with two arrows pointing away from each other. She reached her finger forward into what was really thin air, the button were just an AI projection. The arrows came together and she was left with a single set of cross hairs. Both railguns were now set to fire together and at the same target. Last but not least she pressed the button marked auto, turning it to manual.

“I’m going to test fire the guns Gupta.”

They were low and still seemed to be travelling very fast. She put the crosshairs on a particularly large tree and pressed the fire button. The poor tree had probably taken centuries to grow so tall, yet the railguns tore it apart in seconds. She took her finger off the fire button and checked the short range scanners.

“Less than half a mile to target.” She said.

There was something else on the scanners now, a military system trying to handshake with theirs. It was probably the Base Omega Hector had gone looking for, but there was no time to investigate the signals. Allison saw a railgun fixed to a flatbed truck, which was firing at what looked like a civilian APC. She had just a split second to decide, to attack or not attack..... Allison used both of the VTOL’s railguns to tear the truck apart.

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Amoe was dreaming without knowing she was dreaming. She was shouting at Bobby, while squeezing his hand as hard as she could. No not Bobby, the face in her dream became Bradford’s.

“This is your fault.” She screamed. “All your fault. I’m never letting you near me again.”

She wanted to hit him, but couldn’t reach him from the bed. Rosa was doing a good job of strangling him though, her tiny hands around his throat. Were they hands ? Amoe looked again and saw claws, perhaps a hint of long writhing tentacles.

“I don’t care..... I’ll love my daughter no matter what she.....”

Amoe’s thoughts changed to anxiety, they’d kill her child, them, they’d do it, experiment on her.

Weirdly she worried about showering too soon after giving birth. She couldn’t go out into the world covered in blood, not all of it hers.

“You should have let me go to a hospital.”

Gillian was dead, lying on the floor near the bed, her throat torn out by strong sharp claws.

Everything changed and she was at the door, looking back at poor Bradford, his dead face a dreadful purple colour, his eyes as red as blood.

“Fuck you ! This is all your fault.”

Amoe ran from the room, baby Rosa in her arms. Her baby was making strange animal noises, but Amoe didn’t care. Her child was alive and no matter what she looked like, she’d die to protect her. It was just that the corridor seemed to go on forever and there were so many doors.

“Why are there so many doors ?”

So many worries filled her head..... Would her baby ever be accepted by anyone ? Should be running so soon after giving birth ?

It didn’t bother her that Gillian was alive again and laughing at her, as Amoe opened door after door and ran down what felt like miles of corridors.

“No, no !” She yelled. “I’ll never let you harm my baby !”

Amoe’s mind was still in turmoil as she woke, the anxiety still making her look around the room for enemies.....Anyone who might hurt Rosa.

“You slept for a while, that’s good.”

Tamara with that wonderful soothing smile, tucking in her sheets, holding her hand. A huge basket of fruit filled a table to the right of the bed. There was no blood, there were no dead bodies and sadly there was no Bradford to offer her support. Everything else went out of her mind, as Amoe realised something else was missing. She squeezed Tamara’s hand.

“Where is Rosa ?”

“With Gillian, she’s just finishing a scan.”

Her own doctor came into the room first, smiling at her as he arrived.

“A little girl, but you knew that.” He said. “Six pounds two ounces.”

Amoe had been to see friends who’d given birth in hospitals. Their babies went everywhere in small carts, but Amoe wasn’t in a hospital. Gillian entered the room, carrying her baby like a proud grandmother, actually kissing Rosa’s cheek.

"Here she is.... As you were sleeping I took her for a scan."

Her baby, her perfect looking baby was given to her. Amoe heard a very baby like chuckle from Rosa and held her quite tightly for a second, enjoying the smell of her child. Lots of tiny fingers and toes, but no claws, no dreadful tentacles.

"Is everything..... As it should be Gillian ?" She asked.

"I ran every test I could think of and ran the scanner over her twice. Rosa is a healthy baby girl, who should outlive us all."

"Good, is she..... Like Bradford ?"

"Yes, one day she'll probably win every event at her school's sports day."

That had worried her a little, but now it felt perfect. She had a perfect little baby girl.

"Can I start feeding her ?"

"Yes, the sooner the better..... And Bobby is fussing, wanting to see mother and child."

Amoe had read so many magazines, but Rosa instinctively knew what to do. All the magazines and baby books hadn't prepared her for the sheer joy of feeding her child.

"I need a while Gillian, time to be alone with Rosa."

"I'll tell Bobby to come back later."

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Roxy made a sudden and rather risky decision. There was no time to consult the others and try to form a consensus. Roxy pressed her foot hard down on the accelerator. The track was dry and flat, the conditions almost perfect. The hired APC wasn't designed for speed, but it quickly got moving at forty miles per hour.

"Are you crazy ?" Asked Hector. "You're driving us closer to that thing."

Camila was far less polite.

"Crazy bitch, you'll get us killed. Stop, that's an order... Stop."

"Stay where we are and we'll die." Said Roxy. "Maggie needs to be closer, she's really good with the fifty calibre. It's our only hope."

Not that Roxy cared what anyone thought, she had no intention of stopping, or even slowing down.

"She's got a point." Said Cruz.

Roxy could hear Maggie firing, though there was no obvious effect from her shots. Tempting to tell her to aim for the railgun itself, but it was probably well shielded. Roxy simply kept her foot on the accelerator and ignored the constant sound of railgun slugs chewing into the outside armour.

"Down everyone, on the floor." Ordered Camila. "The front armour is the strongest."

"Los cojones !" Yelled Cruz, bollocks."

The armour near the roof had been penetrated from the front, right through to the rear. The APC was now effectively open to the elements and Roxy could feel a breeze on her check.

"I hate to put you under pressure Mags !" Yelled Roxy.

"I know Roxy.....The damn thing must be covered in thick armour plate."

Roxy saw one of the raiders fall off the truck, they were that close, yet the weapon was still firing.

Another burst of slugs cut through the cabin, but luckily it was aimed high and didn't hit anyone.

Parts of the APC's roof were beginning to resemble a rice strainer, but Roxy kept her foot down.

Suddenly the railgun was destroyed, the truck blown apart.

"Did you hit something Mags ?" She asked.

"No, they did." Said Hector.

He was pointing at the sky above them, as the VTOL turned and came in for another run. There was no mercy, no holding back. The aircraft destroyed all three trucks, before going after the men on the ground.

“Bradford, it has to be Bradford.” Said Camila.

“His timing couldn’t be better.” Said Hector.

The raiders were well equipped, a missile came up from the ground and hit the VTOL. For a few seconds there was just a ball of flame in the sky, before the aircraft appeared again, apparently undamaged.

“Damn, they build those things well.” Said Hector. “I’m glad they’re on our side.”

The aircraft went round twice more and it had missiles of its own. There were explosion beyond the burning trucks, too far away for Roxy to see.

“What are they attacking Mags ?” She asked. “Can you see from up there.”

No answer, so Roxy looked round and noticed blood dripping from the turret.

“She’d been hit Hector, Maggie has been hit.”

Cruz helped him lower Maggie down from the turret. The good news was Maggie complaining as they did it.

“Hey that hurts... Careful...Owwwww.”

“I told you to keep your head down.” Said Hector. “As you said to me, it’s only a bit of your ear.”

“Bastard.”

Good, they were bickering, which meant her wound probably wasn’t that serious. Roxy drove towards where she could see the VTOL landing.

“Scars are just to remind you to duck next time.” Said Camila.

“I hate you, all of you.” Shouted Maggie.

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Bradford wasn’t really into believing in deities. His watchers had opened his mind up to all sorts of possibilities, but he just wasn’t the religious type. He only attended church for weddings, christenings and funeral, or matches, hatches and dispatches as ZMB San Pablo referred to them on its morning show.

“Please Gupta, explain that again..... Slowly ?” He asked.

There had been the good news of finding everyone in the APC alive and well. Maggie Kelly had a piece of her ear missing, but Yasmine had dealt with that. Things seemed to be going well, until fate had decided to give him a hefty kick in the groin.

“The VTOL motors won’t run and we can’t fix them Bradford, at least not out here in the Badlands.”

“But they were repaired, working as good as new. You told me that Gupta.”

Bradford didn’t like to bully anyone, but there were times when a little bullying seemed justified.

“It was repaired Bradford..... But any running repair can be.....”

“So, you’re telling me the VTOL could have fallen out of the sky ? Be very careful what you say next Gupta.”

“No, I’m definitely not saying that, the repair was solid. There was the missile Bradford, the heat managed to get inside some ducting..... Bottom line, the motors are fucked and we can’t fix them.”

Bradford wanted to scream at someone, but it wasn’t Gupta’s fault.

“Show me Gupta.” He said. “I trust you, but something this huge.... I need to see with my own eyes.”

The pilot wasn’t doing too good and Yasmine didn’t have the skill or the equipment to do anything about it. An infection was the likely cause of his illness, something deep inside his burned and

broken legs. He was lying on the cockpit floor and trying to make himself useful, though Yasmine thought he only had a few days to live.

“So you’ve come to look now.” Snapped the pilot. “I’ve told Gupta until I’m blue in the face. We were lucky everything held together when we landed. This aircraft needs new circuit boards we don’t have and probably a few AI processors too.”

The man was obviously in pain and should have been given enough pain killers to knock him out. They needed him though, for the knowledge in his head.

“I believe you.” Said Bradford. “If I’m going to destroy this very expensive aircraft I need to understand the problem. I might have to explain it all to a very angry President Herbert.”

“Destroy her..... You can’t destroy her.” Said the pilot.

“I can and I will. My standing orders are to use explosives to blow the VTOL apart, if there’s the slightest chance of her falling into the wrong hands.”

“You don’t understand, she’ll blow..... There’ll be a huge explosion and a crater the size of Herbert Stadium.”

“Then we’ll need to be long gone when that happens.” Said Bradford. “Now, I can see we have power, even the clock still works. Show me why we’re not going anywhere.”

Gupta sat in the pilot seat and pressed the series of buttons required to start the powerful motors. There was a slight audible beep and four error codes came up on the diagnostics screen.

“What do the codes mean ?” Bradford asked.

“Three of them start with a C, they’re classified, only understood by the tech guys who put her together.” Said the pilot. “The one I know about is telling us the auto stabilisers aren’t working.”

“Could we run without them ?”

“No, completely impossible.”

Bradford looked at the error codes and tried to think of a plan, but there was really only option. He had to blow up the hugely expensive aircraft. Perhaps it was being selfish, but his main worry was that the military might not give him another one.

“We could seal it up tight and come back for it.” Suggested Gupta.

“No, my orders were clear and came from Otis Herbert himself. One day a group of men in suits will ask me about all this and due diligence is sure to come up. I’m going to ask you both again; is there any way we can repair this aircraft ?”

“No.” Said Gupta.

“No, she’s not going anywhere.” Said the pilot.

At least there was power. Bradford picked up the microphone used to talk to main cabin.

“This is Bradford. No discussions, no delays, this is an order. We’re abandoning and destroying the VTOL. Strip out anything useful and get it into our APC. Talk to Camila about using her APC if you need the space. Get moving, we’re leaving in half an hour.”

The noises coming through the partition were encouraging, lots of busy PD489 operatives. Bradford knelt next to the pilot, slightly ashamed that he hadn’t known the man’s name until talking to Yasmine.

“I’ll make sure you get more pain meds before you’re moved.” Said Bradford. “Yasmine said she can amputate Ben, that might give you more of a chance. What do you think ?”

“No, she mentioned it and said it was still fifty-fifty that I’d..... You know. I’d rather go out with all the bits I was born with.”

“Ok, if you need anything let me know.”

Bradford left the VTOL and went to see Camila. If anyone knew how to safely set a timed charge to blow their aircraft apart, it was her.

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Night in San Pablo City and Amoe was having trouble getting to sleep. Gillian wanted to keep her in the maternity room for a couple of days, which she didn't mind at all. Anything to make sure Rosa was healthy and likely to thrive. There was something which worried her though, a hangover from that terrible dream.

"I need to know Rosa."

Amoe didn't want to leave her child, even for a few minutes. There were doors to be opened though, probably buttons to be pressed. To manage that while carrying a new born child... No Rosa would be fine, there was no need to wake her. Amoe put on her slippers and the nice red dressing gown Bradford had bought her. Someone female had probably helped him choose it, probably Tamara, but she didn't mind that.

"It shows he cares and wanted to get it right." She muttered.

Her room door opened, she was certain it would. She'd have noticed anyone locking it as they left. There was a slight sound of someone watching the night time offering from ZMB San Pablo. A nurse in the room opposite hers, fast asleep in a chair while the TV screen showed an old black and white movie. There was something soothing about monochrome films in a world which seemed too full of full colour tragedy. Amoe put her hand on the door to the new 'Amoe maternity area' and pushed.

"So far, so good."

The door opened and she was in the corridor that had seemed to go on forever in her dream. It was really quite short, she could see the main doors to the Research Labs, barely thirty feet away. There were other doors on either side and not everyone was home in their beds. She saw someone through the glass part of the door, a woman looking at a screen. No one saw her though, or if they did, no one came out to challenge her.

"Now I will know."

Her chest tightened as her hand went towards the large green button to the right of the main doors. 'Press To Open'

It said in cheerful green letters, but would they, open ? Amoe pressed and heard the usual buzzing sound. She pushed the door and took two steps. She was almost in the corridor, the main elevators just in front of her. All she had to do was press the call button and take the elevator to the ground floor. Through the main doors and she'd be out into another warm San Pablo night. Amoe didn't do that of course, she turned and walked back to her room. She watched her baby sleep for a while, while remembering a line from an old Lisa See book, one she'd read as a child. A real book, one printed on paper and kept on a shelf in her father's library.

'There is only one perfect child in the world and every mother has her.'

"You are perfect Rosa." She muttered.

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