

## Bradford II – Badlands

### Chapter 3 – Homicide

**“I do have a bottle of Devil’s Promise. Can I bring it round later ?” He asked.**

**“The genuine stuff ?” Maria asked. “Screw top bottle, ink on the label that comes off on your fingers ?”**

**“Oh yes, the authentic stuff.”**

**“Fine, I’ll be home by about eight.”**

⊖

Ideally Bradford would have travelled out to the Badlands in something small and discreet. It made sense to use the Huey SK9 though. The most powerful helicopter made in any of the New Nations, its four rotors gave it enough lift to carry a heavily armoured APC, fifty soldiers and all their equipment. Nothing to do with the Bell Huey family of helicopters of course. As was now normal practise, the name had been borrowed and a dozen new helicopters proudly bore the Huey name. Everything from small one man transports, right up to the enormous SK9. So large that it had filled the roof helipad of the PD489 headquarters building, part of its fuselage hanging over the edge of the building.

“Unlikely to be a trap, but you’d be a good scalp for several subversive groups.” Roland had told him. “I’ve allocated one of the new APCs to you and twenty of our best operatives.”

Which of course required a massive four rotor helicopter, to transport it all into the Badlands. It all seemed a bit overkill to Bradford, a long way from his trips out to the Badlands with just Gupta and Maria, all of them in an ordinary four door electric car. Roland was right though; there was a chance that the subs had murdered Douglas DeFreitas, to lure a lot of high level security people to the scene. They’d used such tactics before, with deadly efficiency.

“Landing in five minutes.” Shouted Sequel.

Not his real name of course. Jules Schneider was the younger brother of Anson, who’d been killed by Samuel. The same build and temperament as his brother, it wasn’t surprising that he’d been called Schneider II by his fellow operatives. Eventually some bright spark began to call him Sequel and the name stuck. Bradford pulled the cloth screen to one side and crouched beside the pilot.

“Land us a good distance from the crime scene.” He said. “We don’t want to cover everything in a fresh layer of sand and dust.”

“Yes sir, we need a hard surface anyway. There’s the car park of a disused building that looks perfect.”

Bradford didn’t even tell the pilot off for calling him sir. The disused building was where he’d killed Amoe’s father, after beating him up a little. There might even be some of Kealani Lee’s DNA in that building. Quite a lot of the man’s blood must have seeped between the floor tiles, as his face had hit the ground. The SK9 landed, mercifully moving his mind away from memories of violence and murder.

“What do you think this place was ?” Asked Sequel.

“Looks like an old school building, from before the trouble.” Someone answered.

Bradford thought the building had been a medical clinic of some kind, but he could hardly admit to knowing the place quite well. He’d looked over a few disused buildings, before choosing that one. All buildings in the Badlands were officially disused and abandoned of course. The subs and the homeless had claimed quite a few though.

“Stay alert.” He told the pilot. “This looks a bad place. Take off if you spot anything that looks remotely like trouble.”

“Yes sir.”

“Bradford, call me Bradford.”

Three operatives left to guard their helicopter, everyone else inside the comfortable new APC. It even had decent seating and air conditioning. Once he’d have thought it all a bit decadent, though he was beginning to appreciate seats that didn’t jar your spine at every hole in the road. There were no decent, well maintained roads in the Badlands of course. Just ancient tarmac, full of potholes, some deep enough to swallow a small car.

“It’s not far, the seismic fissure is behind the ridge over there.”

Yasmine pointing, though he knew where the hole in the ground was. It looked quite a distance away, though he’d wheeled Lee’s body the whole distance, strapped into an old wheelchair. Yes, that was why he’d assumed the building was a medical clinic.

“I see it, thank you. Glad you’re well enough for duty.” He told her.

“We’re still short of decent scene of crime analysts.”

There was a thick bandage on the left side of her face and she looked awful, but he was glad she’d been included in the team. His comms system played a few musical tones, telling him Roland wanted to talk to him. The connection wasn’t good, it never was. Whatever had happened in the Badlands, had left quite a few nasty things behind, a legacy of the troubles that had nearly destroyed the world. One scientist had told him magnetic disturbances had been left behind in the rocks.

“Hi Roland.”

“The usual crap connection, I’ll keep it short. The president wants to meet you, after you’ve examined the seismic fissure and the remains. He’s given us the killing of Douglas DeFreitas to investigate, but given Lee’s murder to the San Pablo police department.”

And there went any chance of deliberately screwing up the investigation, or pinning Lee’s murder on a group like Dysto-Guerra. It meant that Hector’s first assignment was going to be leaving a couple of squibs in the old clinic. Unlikely there was any viable DNA still there, but there was no point in taking chances.

“I understand Roland. Family connections make it too personally. He had to give the crime to the San Pablo homicide people.”

“That’s what I thought. You’re invited to the presidential mansion though, so he can explain in person.”

“Fine, confirm with his people that I’ll be there.”

It wasn’t a disaster, San Pablo Homicide, had a clear up rate of about fifteen percent. It wasn’t that they were incompetent, just overworked. There were over twenty thousand murders and suspicious deaths every year.

“Stop the vehicle.” He told the driver. “I want to walk the last fifty yards.”

Yasmine one side, Sequel the other, with the rest of his people fanning out to either side. They’d obviously decided that their boss needed protecting, saving from his own eccentricities. It wasn’t the worst part of the Badlands though and he wanted to get a feel for the terrain. He had his jacket over his shoulder and his shirt unbuttoned, by the time they reached the fissure. It was afternoon in the Badlands, when the temperature really began to rise. The body of Doug DeFreitas was still there of course, the case was theirs to investigate. A little way off a police team were busy placing the remains of Kealani Lee into a body bag. The San Pablo medical examiner himself was helping. He recognised Bradford.

"Hell of a day for it." He called.

"And it'll get hotter before dusk." Bradford called back.

The surveillance team who'd found Doug's body, had left two metal ladders, secured into the ground with metal spikes. Bradford climbed down into the fissure to examine the body. Doug had been the wealthiest property developer and realtor in the New Nations. There were posters everywhere with his face on and 'Call me Doug,' printed under his name. His style was tacky in the extreme, but so was San Pablo.

"They could have at least used a bug spray on the body." Said Yasmine.

The body had been there less than a day, but the insects were hungry. There was the unmistakable smell of decomposition and a small cloud of flies hovering over the hole in Doug's head. Yasmine used an insecticide and then a tissue stabiliser to slow down the process of decay. Bradford found a rock to sit on and left her to examine the corpse.

"Three neat wounds from an Ion blaster." She said. "One in the forehead and two through the chest. No signs of any other wounds, though there are a few abrasions from being thrown down a seismic hole."

Yasmine used a smartcam to take lots of 3D pictures of the scene, before rolling the body in its side. She dug through his pockets, obviously finding nothing.

"No wallet, no credit cards." She said.

"His guards probably killed him and decided to risk using his credit cards." Said Bradford. "With luck, we might have had a break."

"I'd have been tempted." Said Yasmine. "He must have had a hell of a credit limit."

"Zirconium level at least."

Roland would already be looking at credit card use. If they were really lucky, they'd have the guards in interrogation before midnight. Bradford helped get Doug into a body bag and left Yasmine to finish off the formalities. It wasn't his case, but he couldn't resist walking over to watch the cops tidying up their crime scene. No one warned him off, or got sniffy about jurisdiction. They all knew that Lee had been the father of Bradford's wife.

"Death by blaster, in case you were wondering." Said the medical examiner. "Two neat holes in the sternum."

Bradford seemed to remember firing three times, maybe four. It had been a long time ago and he might have missed bones entirely with the other shots. The Badlands quickly removed all soft tissues from a body.

"Not my case." Said Bradford. "I'd appreciate it if you'd copy my office in on your reports though."

What was the guy's name? Nichols, yes he remembered him from a few autopsies during his time as a grunt. He had no idea of a first name. Nichols was looking at the ground, probably deciding if doing a favour for PD489 was likely to blight his career, or help it.

"Yes, I can do that for you." Said Nichols. "Does the family know his remains have been found?"

"Yes, they've been told."

"Good, that simplifies things."

Nichols looked hot, the Badlands didn't suit a middle aged guy carrying a little excess weight. Actually they didn't really suit anyone.

"To think they're going to build homes here..... Madness, pure madness." Said Nichols.

"With irrigation and aircon.... Still, I wouldn't like to live here."

"Madness." Added Nichols.

Bradford walked slowly back towards their helicopter, noticing that three of his operatives had been assigned to shadow him everywhere. Curse or blessing ? He still wasn't quite sure, though he was getting used to being a little over protected. Yasmine would be some time, collecting soil samples and bottles of bodily fluids from Doug's body. Bradford sat on the front of a cop car and looked towards the hills in the north.

"That is where it happened Brad... Do you honestly think they don't know what it was ?" Juliette had once asked him, his college sweetheart.

Juliette had been the first and last person to call him Brad, since he'd been a kid; he discouraged it after he graduated. It seemed a bit lightweight as a name. He'd lost touch with Juliette after college and he was slightly afraid to look for her. Part of him had thought her capable of joining one of the Dysto groups and that was something he'd rather not know. He met her again by chance, she was attending a music concert with her husband and daughter. She still had that look of sadness and sympathy in her eyes, when she looked at him.

Juliette had brought him out to the Badlands in a borrowed car. Neither of them had been armed, it was a miracle they'd come home in one piece. It was Juliette who tried to open his mind to new ideas, which had sounded more like treason than valid viewpoints.

*Dystopia;*

*An imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad, typically a totalitarian or environmentally degraded one.*

He knew the dictionary definition by heart, his college sweetheart had read quite a bit about the growing Dysto movement. Now it covered the globe and was involved in numberless acts of terrorism. It reminded people of the ill-fated 'Jihadi,' movement and its brutality.

"I just don't get it Juliette, people are happy and have never been happier." He'd told her.

"As long as they don't ask too many questions Brad."

"But we're encouraged to be curious. I myself have asked the lecturers many political questions." She looked at him with a kind of pity.

"How many answers have you received Brad ? Proper answers that covered both sides of the argument."

"Well.... in the end I realised that my own views did coincide with the views of our government."

"And that doesn't worry you Brad, or at least make you curious ?"

Then it hadn't, but that had been before discovering that his mind had been altered, his curiosity curtailed, his physical body augmented.

To the north was the centre of the Badlands, still the object of new crazy theories, at the rate of about five or six a year. The media people at ZMB encouraged it, actually having public phone-ins and voting.

"Sixty percent of you think it was a rogue Asian nuke."

"Bob from Longmont believes an American missile went off course."

"Gerry from 17 East, says I'm a Moron and it was a Chinese dirty bomb."

Or a hybrid device with chemical and biological agents, also full of depleted uranium. There were as many ideas as there were citizens of San Pablo, probably all wrong. There was no conspiracy to hide the truth, Bradford knew that now. The simple truth was that no one understood what kind of lethality had hit the Badlands, or why it was still poisoning hundreds of square miles of barren land. Very few braved the centre of the Badlands and few of those ever returned.

“Ok, I’m done.”

Yasmine stood beside him, carrying two heavy bags. He took them off her without thinking, hoping she didn’t think it insulting. He didn’t understand the new gender politics. Never would, didn’t really want to.

“Find anything useful ?” He asked.

“No. I tend to agree with the prevailing rumour, that his own guards were paid to kill him.”

So did Bradford, but the real trick was finding out who had paid them, and who had paid them. Then repeat another half dozen times and you’d probably still find just another paid go-between. It was all like an endless progression of Russian dolls. The clever bit was finding the person responsible for killing ‘Call me Doug,’ before President Herbert lost patience and sacked him.

~ ~

Amoe felt grief, genuine deep grief. Surprising as she knew her father had used her, having her kidnapped to slow down a PD489 investigation. She’d also assumed he was dead a few months after he’d vanished. Not in hiding, none of his bank accounts had been touched, even the secret ones in some of the other New Nations.

“Almost impossible to hide anything these days.” Maria had told her. “Our IT specialists have been watching his accounts since your father vanished. All of his bank accounts, including the ones in New Borongan. Unless your father is living on thin air.....”

So he was a bastard and she’d known he was dead for a while, but it was knowing it for certain which was beginning to kick in.

“Are you alright ?” Gillian asked her. “You didn’t even grumble when I put the cold scanner on your tummy.”

“I think it’s finding out my father is really dead. I suppose part of me thought he was on a beach somewhere. I know he was a bad person, very bad, but.....”

“He was still your pop....Yes I get it.”

“How are my tests ?”

Gillian handed her a colour picture, which still looked like a blob with arms. Another three months and hopefully, that blob would be a baby girl called Rosa.

“These things are always so..... Crap to be honest.” She said.

“Anything that could give you a clearer picture, has a chance of harming Rosa.” Said Gillian. “All your tests are perfect, apart from a slightly elevated blood pressure. Nothing serious, but I’d like you to come in again I’m afraid.”

“No problem Gillian. Do whatever further tests you think need doing.”

There were noises coming from outside the examination room, a male voice getting quite agitated. Gillian tutted and opened the door a tiny amount, while she quietly talked to someone. Her voice rose as she shouted at someone, before closing the door.

“..... You can sit and wait until I’ve finished !”

“Who’s out there ?” She asked.

“Bobby Laszlo. Ever since Bradford put him on the payroll, he thinks he owns the place. He wants to see you, but he can wait until we’re finished.”

“He has seen me naked a few times, but I don’t think he’d like my stretch marks.”

Amoe knew that Gillian still saw herself as Bradford’s surrogate mother. It was nice to know Bradford had a maternal influence at work, there were times when Gillian was a civilising influence. It was just that Amoe couldn’t resist yanking her chain a little. She saw Gillian twitch and look sideways at her.

“Seen you naked, really ?”

“Relax Gillian. A whole gang of us go skinny dipping on a private beach in Pandan.”

“I never thought..... No.....I’ll help you off the examination table.”

Too easy, poor Gillian would still look slightly flushed and embarrassed for the rest of the day. Amoe did need helping getting down from the table though. Her joints were beginning to seriously ache by lunchtime. At first pregnancy had been a wonderful new experience, but now she just wanted it to end.

“Ok, panties on and dress adjusted.” She said. “We can let Bobby in.”

“Are you sure ?” Asked Gillian. “I’m sure I can find someone to throw him out of the building.”

It wasn’t just that Bobby had saved her life twice, maybe three times. He had the whole roguish charm thing going on, which was irresistible as long as it was in small doses.

“He’ll only sulk Gillian, we’d better let him in.”

Bobby came in with a huge bunch of flowers and a serious look on his face. Bradford must have told him about her father being found, or one of his contacts had told him. He put the flowers on the table and hugged her.

“I heard they found Kealani.” He said. “Now you and your mom can finally have a funeral and say goodbye.”

Gillian looked on disapprovingly, as she hugged Bobby. Gillian just didn’t understand. Yes, bobby was probably a bad guy, actually definitely a bad guy, a crook. He was their crook though and that made the difference. He stepped back and looked at her bump.

“How is Rosa doing ?” He asked.

“Fine.”

She showed him the picture, which looked like a blob.

“These things are like an ink blot test, it could be anything.” He said.

Gillian just gave him her best look of disdain. He was going to be one of Rosa’s God parents, as was Gillian. Amoe’s family were old school catholics, God parents had the whole set of promises to make. He’d have to stand in a church and renounce Satan and all his works.

“I can’t actually see him bursting into flames.” Bradford had said, a few times.

There was going to be tension among the God parents, which Amoe was determined to keep well away from Rosa. She wanted a little time with Bobby. Bradford and Gillian would never tell her all the gory details about the death of her father. Bobby would though and she needed to know everything.

“Is the staff cafeteria any better these days ?” She asked.

“Awful.” Answered Bobby.

“Never mind, you can join me for coffee and drive me home afterwards.”

Bobby gave her a mock bow, as he picked up her flowers and the large bag she carried everywhere.

“I’d be honoured my lady.”

~

~

Maria Gonsalves was on her way across the city, when she picked up a message from her office. It appeared that Bradford had been picked up by a PD489 car after seeing the president and was on his way to a serious incident in 27 East. She’d had him flagged up on the persons of interest database for days, waiting for just the right opportunity.

“Got you.” She muttered. “Now you can’t hide from me.”

The Hector Pérez business was just the fresh crap icing on a bitter cake. Bradford had been treating her like a crime world source, rather than someone who controlled a department larger than his. Everything was one way, his way. There was no sharing of info anymore, no.... Respect !

“Bastard.” She muttered.

A cheap hotel was getting all the police attention in 27 East, at least a dozen cop cars blocking the street, no doubt annoying the local population. There was even a fire department truck, jammed into a no parking zone. Maria added to the traffic chaos, by leaving her car behind the fire truck.

“Sorry lady, this an active crime scene.”

She only had a laminated photo ID, but the cop came to attention as she flashed it at him. It wasn't every day that the head of the government intelligence unit, turned up at a crime scene.

“Yes of course, the bodies are on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor, room 8010.” He told her.

Her pulse increased slightly at the mention of bodies, excitement rather than apprehension. Maria loved her current job, but did sometimes miss being at the sharp end. There were some days, when the results of weeks of mass data collection, failed to excite her. Another uniform wanting to see her ID outside the elevator and another just inside the hotel room. They were probably trying to impress the famous Bradford Scott. These days, it seemed that everyone and his dog wanted to work for PD489. Maria heard his voice, before seeing him.

“Of course the hotel has surveillance footage, the manager is lying to you.” Bradford was saying.

“This is the sort of hotel that hires room by the hour and he doesn't want to upset his clients. You need to scare him ! Scare him more than he's scared of upsetting the pimps. Or if I can see him if you like ?”

“No, I can handle it..... Johnson, come with me.”

A red faced detective ran past her, closely followed by a young uniformed officer. Bradford was at the back of the hotel room, crouched over a body.

“Still making friends with your charm and diplomacy.” She said.

He did twitch a little at her voice, though he didn't look up.

“Of course the hotel has cameras, he should have known that.” Said Bradford. “Look at this Maria, tell me what you see. I know you'll understand the significance.”

Ahh flattery, which sadly often worked. Maria could feel her anger subsiding, as she pulled the dead man's jacket to one side.

“Two blaster hits in the chest, both likely to have pierced the heart.” She replied. “The wounds haven't been cauterised, so we're talking about a modern military Ion blaster.”

“I knew you'd spot that in seconds.” Said Bradford. “A professional hit before we had a chance to track the stolen credit cards. Someone knew we'd find them and wanted them silenced, permanently.”

The last piece of the jigsaw fell into place in her mind. These were the men hired by Douglas DeFreitas to protect him, his highly paid mercenaries. Only someone had paid them even more money, to forget all about loyalty and kill Doug. Maria felt no sympathy for the dead men.

“I'm guessing they paid cash for the room ?” She asked.

“Yes, credit cards still unused. It's likely one of the hotel staff knew who to call, or it might even have been a dirty cop.”

A room full of cops, all probably taking the occasional hundred Herbert's to look the other way.

Bradford must have seen the expressions on their faces and simply didn't care.

“Are you finished here ?” She asked.

“Yes, the bodies will be taken for Gillian to look over, though I don’t expect she’ll find anything of interest.”

“So the case is yours ?” She asked. “Officially given to PD489 ?”

He was giving her his ‘so you don’t know everything’ look, which was infuriating. It was as if he thought she was wired into the government super computers and cognisant of every single thing going on in San Pablo.

“Yes I got the job, though it might not be a blessing.” Said Bradford. “We all know Herbert doesn’t like to be disappointed.”

“Walk me outside, we need to talk.” She said.

The traffic chaos was worse, two vans now added to the mass of cop cars. Bradford waved at one of the drivers, it seemed they were there to collect the bodies. She led, taking him over to her car, making him sit inside.

“You used to be good with people.” She said. “Those cops in the hotel room hate you now and angry cops have long memories.”

“They’d hate me anyway. Come on Maria, how many girl’s nights have you been invited to since your promotion ?”

He had a point, but she liked to think she was handling being the boss, far better than he was. She also remembered him taking a few bribes himself. He’d once told her it was the only way to pay his rent and eat a decent meal most days.

“You might need digging out of hole one day.” She told him. “Keep upsetting cops and you might find none of them come when you need them.”

“Fine, fine, I’ll work on my interpersonal skills.”

“You can start by sharing.... What have you done with Hector ?”

She saw him hesitate slightly. The lack of trust was beginning to seriously annoy her.

“Hector is undergoing surgery to change his face.” Said Bradford. “He’ll then be my eyes and ears among the various groups in the Badlands. Probably reporting to Camila more than me.”

“Thank you, why was that so hard ?”

“It’s just that I don’t know who you share things with anymore.”

Anger caused her to dig a knuckle into his chest and then do it again, because he hadn’t winced enough the first time.

“You are such a fucking idiot Bradford Scott.” She yelled. “I’m still the same Maria, I haven’t changed. I trust you by sharing everything, but you keep cutting me out of the loop.”

He was rubbing his chest and looking contrite. The trick was not to give him time to recover.

“Ok, I’ll share Maria, I promise.”

Her knuckle dug into the same spot as before, making him gasp.

“You need to keep that promise, or there might come a day when turning up at my place with a bottle of Devil’s Promise, doesn’t work anymore.”

“Roland, he can be your contact.” Said Bradford. “I tell Roland everything and I’ll tell him to pass on anything even remotely likely to be useful to you.”

She brought her fist back again, knuckle ready to strike.

“I will tell Roland when I get back to the office, just stop jabbing me. You can know anything and everything.... Call Roland twice a day if you like.”

“Fine, you share and I share and we’ll get along just fine.”



For some reason she kissed him quickly on the lips. Only a peck, but she had no idea why she'd done it. He gave her that dopey look though, the one that made her want to throttle him and protect him, all at the same time.

"I do have a bottle of Devil's Promise. Can I bring it round later?" He asked.

"The genuine stuff?" She asked. "Screw top bottle, ink on the label that comes off on your fingers?"

"Oh yes, the authentic stuff."

"Fine, I'll be home by about eight."

~

~

Time to plan the mission out properly always seemed to be limited, when it was one of Bradford's secret jobs. The original plan had been to use Hector, but his face would be covered in bandages for at least another twenty four hours.

"You know I wouldn't push it, unless it was urgent." Bradford had told her. "There is evidence in the disused clinic that needs to be destroyed. Two squibs should do it."

No other explanation given or asked for, Camila prided herself on not asking lots of stupid questions. If Bradford said the old ruined building needed ruining even further, she'd make sure the job was done and done right. Three in the morning and she should have been somewhere else, but jobs for Bradford always came first. She saw Javi walking silently back towards the old van, before getting into the passenger seat. He had a pair of high tech night vision goggles, courtesy of Bobby Laszlo. There had been a price of course, there always was with Bobby.

"No one likes to be out in the Badlands at night, not even the cops." Said Javi. "There is one cop car parked near the hole where they found Doug DeFreitas. There are only two cops in the car and one of them is asleep in the back."

Javi, full name Javier Pavuls, was currently dating Sofia, her teenage daughter. He did have other skills of course, but best of all; neither he or his family had any connection with her people. Not that her team talked to the cops or anything, but they talked to each other, which could bring its own dangers. She liked Javi and he'd responded well to her; 'bring my daughter home pregnant, in tears or bruised and I'll have you skinned and hung up under the expressway,' chat.

Sofia was a healthy teen, who seemed to change her boyfriends with scary regularity. It was what kids did now and her daughter probably knew more about contraception and safe sex than she did. There wasn't the time to properly check out her daughter's new conquests anymore, but the skinning threat seemed to be working. Camila handed a cloth bag to Javi.

"You know what to do." She said. "Two squibs, one in the basement and one near the entrance doors. Be careful to give yourself enough time to get clear. Have you seen a squib go off?"

"No Mrs Martínez."

"The flash is brighter than the sun and the heat turns concrete to dust. Get as far back to the van as you can, before they go off."

He nodded and left the van, disappearing into the darkness.

"He'll be alright." She muttered.

A boy in his late teens wasn't her first choice, but Bradford insisted on her using someone outside of her gang, the Hyenas. That had been the whole point of obtaining Hector, to be an independent operative. It had been a long day and Camila had almost drifted off into a shallow sleep, when the bright flash lit up the Badlands, followed by another flash and the sound of an explosion. A cloud was rising into the night sky, a hot cloud, glowing orange and yellow.

"Sofia will never forgive me if I've killed him." She muttered.

Javi did seem to be outlasting the rest, already past the usual three months her daughter considered to be adequate to try out a new boy. She heard scrambling near the van and Javi was inside, accompanied by the smell of burnt hair. He was shaking so much that Camila risked turning on the van's interior light.

"I wasn't sure the adhesive tape was fixed..... Then it stuck to my hand."

Pity would come later and treatment for his burned hands and scalp. Firstly she had to know that the clinic had been cleansed by fire of anything Bradford might want destroyed. Javi was no innocent she'd encouraged into bad ways. Camila was aware he was into a little street crime and burglary, just not carried out on his home turf. Every parent of a teenage boy, knew that eventually he'd come home injured, his parents shouldn't kick up too much of a fuss.

"You did manage to get both squibs inside the building though?" She asked.

"Yes, but I barely had time to get flat on the ground, just twenty feet away.... Maybe less."

He looked at his hands, as if seeing the burned flesh for the first time.

"My hair was burning..... I must have used my finger....."

Camila went through the contents of her pockets, knowing she'd brought out a military multistick for just such an eventuality. At the moment Javi was in shock, but soon the pain would arrive, in his burnt fingers and scalp. Unless she wanted a screaming boy in the van, she needed to do something about it.

"This will help." She said.

She selected the red pain relief button on the multistick and jammed the sharp prongs right through his trousers and into the muscles below. He never made a sound and soon the drugs had him leaning back in the seat, appearing to be quite relaxed. He'd actually fall asleep soon, she'd used the same treatment on several injured members of her gang. By the time the pain returned, she'd have him in the care of a doctor she knew, who didn't ask questions.

"But will Sofia ever forgive me for damaging her boyfriend?" She muttered.

Camila turned on the electric van, keeping its lights off until she made it to the pothole strewn highway, several miles away. As she suspected, Javi was in a deep sleep, before they were out of the Badlands.

~ ~

It was useful having Maria still living in the block, though it didn't help his perpetual lack of sleep. Camila's usual tame doctor was away, so Javi was being treated by Emily, the oncologist who lived in the block. Fortunate for Javi as it turned out.

"We've been appointed as an official hospital to treat injured public employees." Said Emily. "The downside is having a ward full of irritable cops. The plus side is extra funding and access to all the latest fast healing drugs."

She'd already given the boy a large dose of local anaesthetic, before rubbing cream over his various burns. Bradford knew the creams were just to keep the air off the burns, he's been on the wrong end of a few thermal devices himself. The injected healing agents were new though, something that tapped right into the cell nucleus, or so Emily had told them.

"Wonder drugs, but incredibly expensive." She said with glee, while injecting Javi with it.

"You've just had a few thousand Herbert's worth Javier." She added.

Playing the system in a minor way seemed to rejuvenate Emily, turning her from a middle aged oncologist, into a street rebel. Maybe she'd always been that way inclined? Bradford had never known her until moving into the block in 7 East Central.

"Will he be alright?" Asked Sofia.

If the girl was upset at her boyfriend being injured, she wasn't showing it. She was giving her mother the occasional withering look though. Mateo, her little brother was up and awake too, watching it all with wide eyes.

"He'll be fine, shouldn't even leave any scars." Said Emily. "The fingerprints may grow back slightly differently, which might cause problems."

"I don't have a driver's license."

"Then you shouldn't have any problem." Said Emily. "Keep your hands bandaged and rest as much as possible. I'll call and have a look at you tomorrow evening."

Bradford heard the arguments between mother and daughter start, as he saw Emily out of Camila's apartment.

"Quite a girl that Sofia." Said Emily. "Are you her father?"

The idea of Emily suspecting he might be, surprised him. Sofia was Samuel's daughter, which was the likely source of her toughness and her rare outbursts of rage.

"No, Sofia isn't mine Emily."

Did the other tenants think that? Not that it mattered, Amoe knew the true story. He paid Emily, despite her protests.

"Take it, no one earns enough and rents go up every year." He told her.

"Thank you Bradford, it will come in useful, I have to admit."

He returned to Camila's lounge, just in time to see her strike her daughter.

"I will not be talked to like that!"

He didn't blame himself for asking Camila to use a casual to plant the squibs. If it wasn't the current problem, it would be something else to set mother and daughter fighting. It was the way they communicated, even Mateo looked on with bored disinterest. Bradford sat down and waited for the row to blow itself out. He needed some details about the mission. He needed to know that the old clinic had been cleansed by fire.

~

~