

Ruby 3

Chapter 12 - Yemen

“Nari had been aware of the plan to move Ishel to the Hummer. It wasn’t a military vehicle, at least it wasn’t in theory. The tough steel shell made it ideal for turning into a temporary prison.”

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~ Then ~

~ The Yemen, about four years ago ~

Kallina had found the ruins years before, about fifty kilometres north of Thamud in the Yemen. The area was hot, dusty and there were no proper roads. If God had wanted to give the world an enema, he’d have probably inserted it into Northern Yemen. The area was full of ancient ruins, most of them in far better condition than the one she was using as a prison for Max Krause.

“Have you run out of paper plates ?” She asked. “I can get some more.”

“No, it always tastes better out of the foil containers.”

She’d bought Max a takeaway from his favourite Indian Restaurant near Brick Lane, London. Less than an hour before, she’d queued up, ordered his meal and admired the flock wallpaper, while his meal was prepared. She was used to moving around the globe at will, it was just money that gave her problems. She had taken US dollars instead of pounds. Luckily the guy behind the counter had liked her and her ‘stupid tourist,’ act. Fifty dollars had bought Max a fairly impressive meal.

“How has your week been Max ?”

He just glared at her, two years and he still just wanted to kill her and escape. Kallina had spent the first six months punishing him for his many and varied sins. Just one sign that he might be capable of redemption and she would have moved him to the house in Georgia. It was no good though, he hadn’t lost a part of his soul, he’d lost all of it.

“I’m down to the last set of batteries for the radio.” He said.

“Did you put it on the list ? Otherwise I might forget.”

“Yes, six D cell batteries.” He replied.

The radio was his one luxury, it could pick up a few English language stations on a good day. The radio had been his reward for not trying to attack her for a month. That had been over a year ago, when she was still trying to correct the problems he had. Didn’t the American’s call their prisons places of correction ? Max really needed a lot of correction.

That had been then and now she simply wanted to keep him away from the rest of the world. Her punishment of him was going to be truly terrible, he was going to share her immortality.

“I can keep you alive forever Max.” She’d once told him. “Here, in this stone prison, forever. Only the world ending or the seas rising will save you.”

That didn’t seem to upset him, there was still the perpetual hatred in his eyes. He’d only ever been given paper plates and plastic cutlery, yet he’d tried to attack her with plastic knives. He’d even tried to attack poor Constanze once, so Kallina had stopped bringing her. That had been the night she’d thrown him against the wall and broken several of his ribs.

“Don’t worry Max, I won’t let you die, ever.” She’d told him. “Two hundred years and you’ll cease to remember things in their proper order and you’ll go very deaf. Parts of human bodies don’t replace Max, you wouldn’t believe the number of cataract operations I’ve had over the years. Ears too Max, bits wear out and need replacing.”

She'd prodded his broken ribs and made him scream.

"Three or four hundred years and you'll be exactly like me !"

There had been a recognition between them that night, of an almost a kindred spirit. They both realised how damaged the other was, but Kallina was the one in control. She'd ceased to torture or beat him and tried to make his prison relatively comfortable. Ruby knew she had Max of course, the monster who'd tried several times to kill the children. Ruby had to know where Max was being kept, but had never mentioned him in two years.

"Could I have a pet of some kind ?" He asked.

"You attacked Constanze." She replied. "I'll bring you a bird in a cage, but if you kill it..... I'll use my knives on you again !"

Fear in his eyes now, he remembered the six month when she'd tried to bring him closer to God, through hundreds of small painful cuts. Kallina's religious leanings covered everything from Old Testament Christianity to Scientology and her mind mixed it all into one large homogenous mush. Some days she was even a fundamentalist atheist. Her one enduring faith was that people could be changed if you beat them into changing. It didn't surprise her that Ruby didn't agree with that view. "I promise to look after it."

"Fine, put a bird in a cage on the list Max and bird food. Everything on the list Max, or I'll forget to bring it."

The ancient buildings north of Thamud had collapsed hundreds of years ago, maybe thousands, leaving just a cellar, buried beneath tons of stone blocks. Wind and rain erosion had turned the pile of rocks into what looked like a natural spur of rock. He had daylight, two of his rooms had gaps between the stones, three inches wide in places. Kallina had used the cellar to store equipment, but it also made a perfect jail.

"Do you ever see anyone out there ?" She asked, looking through the gap in the stones.

"Just a man with some goats." He answered. "A long way off though."

Probably the truth, Kallina had found traces of a camp fire about a kilometre to the west. Few people came to that part of the Yemen and they were unlikely to dig a crazy man out of a hole in the ground. The locals would think the voice was a Jinn and run away, not stopping until they reached Aden. She waited for him to finish his list, he was becoming a very expensive house guest. Three new shirts, two pairs of black jeans, trainers. The list went on and on, covering all his favourite foods to a tube of toothpaste. She'd drawn the line at paying hundreds of dollars for his chemical toilets. Kallina stole them, entire toilets, from building wholesalers and dumped the old ones out in the ocean.

"Is she still alive ?" He asked.

"Ruby you mean ?"

"Yes."

"Yes, she's doing well and the children are growing up."

"You're all monsters ! Abominations !" He yelled.

Once she'd have cut him and then healed the wounds to cut him again. Now she sat at the table with his chessboard and gave herself the black pieces.

"Your turn to start." She said.

He looked like everyone's favourite old uncle, as he used his cane to limp over to the table. He wasn't harmless though, he'd boasted of killing two snakes with his cane. Several desert creatures had tried to move in with him and none of them survived. Max sat opposite her and actually smiled.

"I might win this time."

He might be right, he was a good player. Kallina knew with certainty that no matter what. Max would have to remain in his prison forever.

~ Now ~

The guard had frozen as soon as he'd seen Pablo's assault rifle aimed at the centre of his face. Charlotte still had her right hand on the man's head, using her gifts, though not at full force. He'd forget his own name for a week or so, but he would eventually recover all his memories. Not pleasant, though better than being dead or lobotomised. Pablo grabbed the man as he collapsed, lowering him to the floor.

"He'll be unconscious for hours." She whispered.

She didn't object when Pablo quickly gagged and secured the man with duct tape, better safe than sorry. It had all been so easy, the guard hadn't been expecting trouble, there was even a radio playing golden oldies somewhere near. Pablo touched her arm and pointed at the second patrolling guard. They walked slowly and carefully, ignoring the radio playing Alannah Myles, singing Black Velvet.

'Black velvet and that little boy's smile

Black velvet with that slow southern style.'

Within touching distance, so close she could smell the guard's cologne. The three gunshots somewhere in the mansion changed everything, the guard swung around.

"Who the fuck....." He began.

Charlotte waved her hand in his direction, as if trying to swat away a fly. The guard dropped his gun, as her powers threw him hard against a wall. Any idea of silence forgotten, as a heavy painting and two flower vases, became caught up in the mini-whirlwind caused by her gifts. Pablo didn't hesitate, shooting the guard twice in the face.

"Sounded like the shots came from the new conversion." Said Pablo.

"I'm sure Christophe can take care of himself." She replied. "We need to get to the Ostby's before they manage to escape."

They heard a woman screaming on the way, probably one of the maids. Probably problems for Jai, but something she intended to ignore. There was only one thing on her mind; she had to capture Monique and Lionel Ostby.

"Stop.....Do you hear that?" Asked Pablo.

So close, she could see the ornamental carved stairs which led up to their private part of the mansion. Only the maids were allowed up there at certain times of the day, according to the information provided by Malou. The sound they could hear was running feet, probably just one person in a hurry. He came around the edge of the staircase, a jacket pulled on over the top of pyjamas. One of the sleeping guards, barely awake, a machine gun of some kind flapping about on a sling over his shoulder. He looked stunned to be confronted by two people who weren't part of the usual Ostby entourage.

"Drop the weapon and you won't be harmed." Shouted Pablo.

A strong, determined, no nonsense voice, she'd have thought twice about not obeying the command. The guard was probably more scared of the Ostbys than them, he grabbed hold of the machine gun.

"No." Said Charlotte.

A wave of her hand and the guard was flying through the air, before hitting the solid post at the foot of the stairs. They were getting into a routine, with Pablo finishing the job with two shots from his silenced assault rifle. Charlotte lifted her face, as if pointing up the stairs.

"The Ostbys next." She said.

He knew they needed to be captured alive and she wasn't going to insult him by reminding him. The old hardwood of the stairs, toughened by the process of ageing, probably saved her from injury. The bullet meant for her dug itself into a stair post and stayed there. Charlotte dodged another bullet as she ran up the stairs. She could hear Pablo telling her stop. She was angry now though, with an anger that might make her careless, but it also made her extremely dangerous.

"They can't be allowed to escape." She yelled.

Lionel Ostby was hiding behind a large suitcase, the sort with built in wheels. He was taking careful aim at her, as she arrived at the top of the stairs. A quick wave of her hand and he hit the wall, the gun still held in his right hand. Charlotte was certain she'd heard his knuckles break, as his hand slammed into the wall.

"Us the Duct tape on Lionel." She said to Pablo. "I'll deal with Monique."

"Bitch..... You broke my hand." Said Lionel.

"Probably not all I'll break today.....Now what is Monique trying to do?"

Another large suitcase on wheel, which Monique had been trying to push into a small private elevator. They'd been close to getting away from her....Another minute or so and they might have made it. Monique put her hand into a bag she had over her shoulder.

"Oh, not a good idea." Said Charlotte.

Not on even a tenth power of what she could do, Charlotte waved at Monique, sending her staggering backwards.

"Look in Lionel's case.....I bet it's not full of clean underwear." She said to Pablo.

Monique had courage; she tried again to grab the gun that was obviously in her bag. A little more power, as Charlotte sent her crashing against the metal elevator doors.

"Crap....I think you cracked one of my ribs."

"Naughty, very naughty Monique.... Drop the bag and I won't have to hurt you again."

Monique gave her one final look of defiance, before dropping her bag on the floor. A large old revolver fell out of it as it landed.

"Now turn around so I can use duct tape in some very interesting way."

"Fuck you." Spat Monique.

"Hmmmmm, mouth first I think."

Charlotte spun her round, pushing Monique against the wall and quickly binding her with duct tape. Half carrying and half dragging, she placed her next to a similarly bound Lionel.

"Wow, you were right about it not being underwear." Said Pablo.

A large suitcase, more like a modern steamer trunk on wheels. As far as she could see, every bit of space was full of large denomination bank notes in a variety of currencies.

"Impressive." Said Charlotte. "I suppose with that much cash; you can always buy new knickers."

Pablo opened the case Monique had been dragging along the hallway and that too was full of cash.

"If it had been a bit lighter.....You might have escaped before we arrived." Said Charlotte.

Monique didn't try to mutter through the duct tape, but the 'Fuck you,' was there in her eyes.

"I'll check their bedroom." Said Pablo. "You never know.....They might have another case full of money."

She knelt in front of Monique, looking at the woman who'd hired assassins to kill Ruby and her friends. The woman who'd wanted to slaughter them all.

"What am I to do with you?" She asked. "I had intended to have a long talk with you here, but all those gunshots. Someone must have heard and called the police. Have you ever been to the Yemen?"

No answer of course, but there was real fear in Monique's eyes. Charlotte had been pulling on the crazy woman persona for so long....She was beginning to wonder if it was still an act.

"Quite nice in parts of the Yemen, though you won't see the nice parts.....Maybe a few scorpions....You'll need to watch for those."

Pablo came out of the Ostby's bedroom, carrying a large pink vanity case.

"No more cash, but there are several sets of fake IDs for them both in this." He said.

"Leave it here, it'll confuse the hell out of the local Gendarmerie."

"So what are we going to do with them?" Asked Pablo.

"A trip.....I'll take them somewhere hot I think."

Christophe and Jai chose that moment to run up the stairs, assault rifles up and ready. They quickly relaxed after seeing the targets subdued and bound.

"We heard shots." Said Pablo.

"One of the guards got away, but it wasn't him shooting at us." Said Christophe.

Good of him not to drop a comrade in the shit, though he did stare hard at Jai.

"Alright.....I screwed up." Said Jai. "The housekeeper seemed harmless.....As I tried to bind her with tape.... She had a gun hidden somewhere...Look."

A nasty ragged wound on the underside of his jaw.

"You were lucky." Said Charlotte. "Another half inch down or to the left....."

"Idiot." Said Pablo. "Did she get away?"

Jai merely nodded at Pablo. No matter how you looked at it, the French police must have been called by someone by now. More than likely by an hysterical housekeeper using a neighbour's phone.

"I'll deal with the Ostby's." Said Charlotte. "I'm not as good at it as Kallina, but I'm fairly sure I can get these two to another part of the globe. Some risk.....But I only need one of them alive to tell me what I need to know."

"I could come with you." Said Pablo.

"No, there really is a risk.....Use the private elevator and take the cash to the hotel. Let Ruby know and she'll probably send Kallina to collect it. I can't speak for Ruby, but she has been very generous with finder's fees in the past."

"You can rely on me Charlie."

Yes she could and not just because he didn't want Kallina coming after him.

"Go on then..... Fuck off before the cops arrive." She said.

She did kiss him on the cheek, as he dragged a case full of cash into the elevator. After they'd gone, it was just her and the Ostby's left listening to the sound of sirens in the distance. It was Lionel with his red, swollen, busted hand who was looking at her with fear in his eyes. Charlotte didn't think she was a monster, just someone who needed information in a hurry. She ran her index finger over his ruined hand and the look of panic in his eyes went away.

"See Lionel, I not only cause pain.....I can take it away. Remember that when I start to ask you questions."

She pulled the Ostbys so that they were back to back and then crouched in front them, her arms wrapped round them both.

“Stop squirming Monique....Keep still, I need to concentrate.”

She'd never been to the basement ruins in the Yemen before, though that didn't stop the location being locked into her mind. She'd shared memories with Kallina a few times. Like an unwanted pizza topping the location of the basement had arrived, unwanted and unloved. It sat in her mind like a beacon. Obviously it had meant a lot to Kallina, memory sharing tended to work like that.

“Here we go.” She said.

Charlotte felt the location and concentrated all of her conscious mind on it. The landing began to swirl about in front of her eyes. More squirming, she tightened her grip on Monique. The heat and humidity told her they weren't in France anymore.

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Nari had been aware of the plan to move Ishel to the Hummer. It wasn't a military vehicle, at least it wasn't in theory. The tough steel shell made it ideal for turning into a temporary prison.

“Like a Faraday cage, Kallina and I can use it to screen Ishel off from her followers, imprisoning and isolating her. Once we've got her there, no force on Earth will be able to rescue her.” Ruby had told her.

Not just the steel cage as a shield, Kallina and Ruby had added all sorts of spells, tricks and gifts to the steel shell of the Hummer. So many that to Nari, it seemed to twinkle with blue light.

“Ahh, here you come.” She muttered.

Nari had chosen a rooftop well. Then again, she had known where Ruby intended to get Doc to park the Hummer. She'd had to move across the rooftop to get a good view of the vehicle, but the female rogue needed to come down from her roof top perch and find another eyrie for the night. Nari could see her, pounding down the road, sniper rifle back in its carry case.

“Hmmm, less impressed this time.”

It was the outside of the building really. Less cladding and far fewer decent hand holds. The female rogue actually missed a hand hold at one point and nearly fell. Not that Nari expected a fall of three or four storeys was likely to prove fatal for such a creature.

“Less places to hide too....I can still see you.”

One aircon unit and that wasn't in an ideal spot. The female rogue had to come slightly out of cover to aim her high powered rifle at the Hummer. Her bullets wouldn't get past the shield Ruby and Kallina had worked so hard to put in place. It was the gunshots that's mattered, the effect they were likely to have. Gunfire would bring the cops, gunfire would cause ensuing chaos. It might even lead to a few blocks of Nairobi becoming nothing but a hole in the ground. Nari ran her rifle's sights over the nearby roof.

“I can get you.....But please don't fire at anyone.” She muttered.

A rogue who probably didn't know what the hell was going on and she was armed with a high powered sniper rifle. The potential for something dreadful to happen was immense. Nari saw her adversary lean past her cover, swinging her rifle towards her. Not in animosity, she'd have felt that and fired first. The female rogue sniper was running her sights over Nari, getting a look at the opposition.

“Look. I'm just a harmless grunt like you.”

For some reason Nari waved and to her amazement, the rogue Das Geheimnis waved back at her. That was it, the moment when Nari thought Nairobi was likely to be spared a minor apocalypse that night. Her adversary was just like her. A grunt on a roof top trying to get through the night without actually killing anyone. If there was an apocalypse, even a small one, it would be caused by their leaders in the parked up Hummer.

“Feels like it’s going to be a long night.” She muttered.

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Inside the Hummer, Doc was feeling a bit put out. No one had told him about the plan to bring the evil alien woman there. After a few threats and a lot of shouting, they were now quiet. Not now, he was still feeling terrified, but later though. He was going to have a long talk with Ruby about being kept in the loop. Transparency, that was what seemed in short supply. Currently Kallina and Ruby were sat on the floor at the rear of the Hummer. The one they called Ishel was sat close to them, but rather worryingly, no one was actually holding her. Sarah was sat next to him, fondling a small Glock automatic with a pink grip.

“I don’t like to moan.....” He whispered at her.

Sarah held a finger up to her lips.

“Then don’t.” She hissed at him.

So much for humans sticking together. Doc didn’t like to think of himself as prejudiced against anyone. Alien creatures and kids with weird powers though! If he survived and after Ruby had paid him in full; he was going to only ever work for humans again. It was going to be an unofficial company policy in future. He might even get a poster printed and hang it on his office wall.

“You can stop trying to summon your minions.” Said Kallina. “You’re sealed in this Hummer until we decide to let you go.”

“If we decide to let you go.” Added Ruby.

He kept expecting Ishel to go crazy and try to kill everyone, it felt like it should be her normal modus operandi. Huge, strong, with a real ‘I take no crap,’ attitude. Instead the leader of the rogue’s leant back against the wall of the Hummer and smiled. A weird inhuman smile on a face that didn’t look designed to smile....But definitely a smile.

“Alright, you’ve shown me how tough and resourceful you are.” Said Ishel. “I’m assuming you now have your own ideas about how we might work together ?”

Doc could see about three of the rogue’s, all keeping their distance. They stood near the main road, seemingly content to watch and wait. On the whole the thirteen were smaller, more compact as Sophie liked to call it. He didn’t know them well enough to recognise silhouettes on a darkened street. At least three of them were lurking near the street that led to his yard. He remembered talk about the neighbourhood becoming a crater in the ground. He wasn’t a particular brave man, nor was he a coward. All the pieces seemed to be getting into place though. The thought of his own mortality gave him goose bumps on his arms.

“It makes sense for us to work together.” Said Ruby. “As equals though, no just using the thirteen as cannon fodder for your own aims. I have a question first though, think of it as a sign of trust and honesty between us.”

“Ask what you like, I don’t guarantee to answer you.”

“Monique Ostby..... Did she approach you, or did you approach her ?” Asked Ruby.

“I’ll know if you lie.” Said Kallina.

Ishel waved her hand, as though trying to dismiss Kallina from the Hummer.

“If I choose to answer I will tell the truth.” Said Ishel. “Monique has held a grudge for years. Not surprising really, you did kill her father. The silly girl was trying to hire back street hitmen for years, though no one took her seriously. There was an Algerian once, but he took her cash and ran off with it. I thought her obsession with your death might be useful, so I encouraged it.”

“But the original idea was hers ?” Persisted Ruby.

“Yes, definitely. By the way I heard KC Lacayo has recently returned to Budapest. I’m sure the police are looking for him though.....All that mess at his office. Sloppy Ruby, very sloppy.”

If Ruby or Kallina were supposed to react, they didn’t. Sarah stopped fondling her gun though and held it properly. Doc had a rifle behind his seat, but he had no intention of reaching for it.

“Which brings us nicely onto terms and conditions.” Said Ruby. “No one involved on either side is to be hurt or killed. No getting revenge for spilled secrets or muddied waters Ishel. If I hear about Lacayo having an unfortunate accident, our collaboration will be over.”

“I’d never hurt KC Ruby, you have my word.” Said Ishel. “He’s far too amusing to harm. His death would be a real loss to the world.”

“No revenge on anyone boring either.” Said Kallina.

“Alright, alright....I could point out that your people fired first tonight. I Ishel, guardian of the people you call the rogue Das Geheimnis; give my word to the following terms of our collaboration. I will not kill or order to be killed, anyone on your side, or my side of this agreement. I will not seek revenge on any betrayers now, or at any time in the future. My aim is purely to break the seal and gain access to the last bastion of our kind. There.....Is that good enough for you ?”

“It will do.” Said Kallina.

Ruby used different words and more of them, though her agreement said much the same thing. After saying it she held out her hand to be shaken. For a few seconds it looked as though Ishel either didn’t want to shake hands, or had no idea what was expected of her. Eventually she smiled and shook Ruby’s hand. Doc hadn’t intended to say a word, it must have been the relief of not expecting to die anymore.

“Thank fuck for that.” He muttered.

They heard him of course, the damned super beings seemed to hear everything. They turned and smiled at him, Ruby even chuckled.

“Yes indeed, thank fuck we reached an agreement.” She said.

“Now will you tell us how you know there are living beings beyond the sealed gateway ?” Asked Kallina.

“Better than that, I’ll show you. I need a little sleep, but we can go there in the morning.” Said Ishel.

“The answer lies in the Great Rift Valley, not that far from Limuru Town.... In fact if you’ll have me I could travel in this wonderful vehicle with you. All those wonderful blocking and screening techniques you’ve used. Usually my mind is full of the thoughts of others, all vying for my attention. In here all is peace.....May I travel with you ? The rest of my people can follow in one of our SUVs.”

“Yes of course.” Said Ruby. “I know the problem, my head used to be full of the same all pervasive thoughts. I could teach you the techniques I used to quieten the noise. If you’d like me to ?”

“Thank you, I’d appreciate that.”

A little while earlier Sarah had killed one of Ishel’s rogues with a bullet to his head. From nearly full on war, they were now instant friends. Doc had never claimed to understand women and strange part alien women were far worse.

“I assume I’m now free to leave ?” Asked Ishel.

“Yes, be back here and ready head north at six in the morning.” Said Ruby.

“Can we make that seven ?” Asked Doc.

He was rewarded by another chuckle from Ruby.

“Alright Doc, it has been an eventful night. We’ll meet up at seven.”

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Charlotte cut the tape and then ripped it off the Ostby's, ignoring their yelps of pain. To add insult to injury, she turned her back on them to explore the ruined basement in the Yemen. Just after dawn, there was enough light from the hole in the wall to just about see by. Candles on a table and a box of kitchen matches covered in dust. She lit two candles for them and one to carry about for her.

"The hole in the floor is your toilet." She shouted over her shoulder. "Just don't fall down it."

She'd never visited the basement before. Max's prison for many years. She had Kallina's memories though and understood the layout. Quite large and on several different levels, though it probably seemed quite small when it was your entire world for months and months. Charlotte had intended to kill the Ostby's to keep them quiet. The basement in the middle of nowhere gave her other options. The portable chemical toilet on the lowest level had gone.

"For the best." She muttered. "It would have been a stinking bug palace by now anyway."

Up and to her right for the storage area. Everything from tinned beans to hand soap and paper plates. Kallina had removed anything that might go bad in a hurry. No spreads, no cooking oil, even the dried foods had gone. Still plenty of paper plates and plastic cutlery though and several plastic wrapped stacks of toilet tissue.

"Looks like they're living out of tins for a while..... They'll survive."

Kallina had really given Max a lot of tinned food to choose from, everything from cans of Spam, burgers and beans, right through to sweet corn. All with pull off lids, so they didn't even need a tin opener. She chose a tin of all day breakfast and turned it over. The best before date was two and a half years ago.

"That's fine." She mumbled.

Up a bit and to the left and she was in to what had been Max's bedroom. A double bed with a steel frame and a decent mattress. Pillows and a pile of dusty blankets, but no sheets. Something rustled and ran away when she lifted a grubby pillow.

"Not exactly the Radisson..... Better than the alternative though."

Three tins of Baygon were lined up on the slit in the stones which Max had used as a shelf. Charlotte shook the one that seemed heaviest for a while, before spraying the blankets and the area around the bed. Still not quite full daylight outside, the narrow gap in the wall showed her a clear sky that still had a few of the brightest stars in it.

"They'll be fine.....I'll get them some sheets and a few more tins of bug spray."

Max had left a cane leaning against a wall, actually more of a cudgel than a cane. She took it upstairs with her to see how the basement's new guests were getting on. They hadn't moved from where she'd ripped off the duct tape. It didn't bode well for their survival.

"You need to explore, there's everything here you need to survive." She said.

"You're going to leave us in this dreadful place ?" Asked Lionel. "Where are we ?"

"I was going to kill you both. Consider this as the better option." Said Charlotte. "You're in a ruined basement of a ruined building in the Yemen. North Yemen to be exact, right in the middle of nowhere, so don't expect to be rescued."

She thrust the heavy stick at Monique, forcing her to take it.

"The previous occupant used this to kill any snakes that tried to set up home here."

"Snakes ! What sort of snakes ?" Asked Monique.

"I have no idea, but he had a bad leg and survived here for years."

For the first time the reality of the situation seemed to sink in, she could see it in their eyes without having to probe their minds.

"Are you going to leave us here for years ?" Asked Lionel.

"If you have questions I will answer them." Said Monique. "Don't leave us here, it's inhuman."

"I'll bring you some more bug spray and some sheets for the bed, you'll be fine."

"Bugs ?! What sort of bugs ? Do you mean scorpions ?" Asked Lionel.

In truth Max had never mentioned scorpions to Kallina, just the snakes. He had talked about quite a few other desert creatures trying to share his home. That didn't seem a sensible way to take the conversation.

"You will be fine." She snapped at them. "Just explore what you've got and adapt. Don't use too much bug spray, it's not good for you. Use the stick to kill anything you don't like the look of. As for how long you'll be here.....That's not my decision to make."

"We'll tell you anything." Pledged Monique.

Charlotte decided to be totally honest, as it was unlikely the Ostby's were ever going to leave the basement again, or at least not for a very long time. Luckily she could leave the question about their future for Ruby to decide.

"I've been pulling thoughts out your heads since we first met in your home." She said. "Most of it isn't new anyway. Mainly I wanted to kill you before your hired a better and probably more expensive assassin. Unless you've already hired someone ?"

Monique was shaking her head at her.

"Just as I thought.....I'll bring you those sheets and the bug spray. I'll try and get back here tomorrow at some time, or Kallina might bring them. She knows this place far better than I do."

"We'll need clean clothes..... It's so hot." Said Lionel.

"Is there water ?" Asked Monique. "We'll need lots of water."

"I saw lots of bottled water in the storeroom. You need to have a good look about and learn to ignore best before dates."

She hadn't intended to do it, but there was a writing pad on the table. Like everything it needed the dust shaken off. Max's last request for his favourite tinned food and another pair of shoes. The pen next to it had dried up, but the pencil still worked.

"Write me a list for tomorrow, everything you need." Said Charlotte. "Not what you want, I'm not a pack horse. Just list what you really need."

"Can we have a few books ?" Asked Lionel.

"On the list, put everything on the list.....I have to go now."

Max was different to the Ostby's, he'd been special forces trained and no stranger to coping with unpleasant local wildlife. Lionel and Monique were so out of their depth that it felt like leaving two toddlers in the lion enclosure at the zoo.

"Just don't fall down the toilet hole." She told them, before vanishing.

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Charlotte had beaten them back to Central Paris and Malou's Hotel. The police had been quite thick on the ground; they'd needed to drive without lights along some narrow country roads. As he'd walked into the hotel pulling one of the heavy suitcases, Malou told him that Charlotte had already returned and had decided to do a little shopping.

"At this time of the day ?" He'd asked.

It was light out, but only just. The time of day only usually seen by office cleaners on their way to work, or drunks still trying to find their way home.

"You know Charlie." Said Malou. "She asked me about obtaining a portalo and some bug spray."

"Yeah, that sounds like Charlie." He'd replied.

Pablo was getting used to the thirteen and their friends. The bizarre was an everyday event, the miraculous occurred every Thursday, or so it seemed. He was used to Kallina being able to pop up anywhere, even his hotel room.

"I've come to look at these cases full of cash." She'd told him.

"No problem.....Do you fancy something out of the minibar ? The beer isn't bad."

She'd swigged at the beer while digging through the cases and fairly quickly giving him a total in the millions of dollars, before instantly giving him the total in Sterling, Euros and Japanese Yen. He was staggered by her ability, but still managed to keep his cool. The amount of cash was huge, even for someone who'd delivered trucks full of cocaine for a cartel.

"Enough for the Ostby's to buy a lot of new knickers." He'd commented.

If Kallina thought his remark was odd, she never showed it. It felt as though they were both competing for coolness, the ability to take anything in their stride. The arrival of Olga had changed all that.

"How much !? I'm due a cut of that Kallina, it's only fair." She'd said.

Olga had been away on an errand for Ruby, one she refused to talk about. Her arrival was unexpected, though demanding a cut of the cash wasn't. He didn't know her that well, but you didn't survive in her game by being withdrawn and hesitant to ask for anything.

"Ruby will need to be consulted first." Kallina had told her.

"I need some now, this whole business has been very expensive."

Two women he really didn't want to upset, began a fierce argument in his hotel room. Anyone else he'd have told them to take their shit elsewhere, but not them. Even worse, he wasn't sure how many of the threats and insults were jokes, or carried deadly potential. After Olga called Kallina a thieving Russian bitch, he'd decided to leave his room for a while. Most of the contents of the minibar went into a bin bag, to go with him up to the roof. Pablo was on his second bottle of a purple coloured alcopop, when he heard the door to the roof open. Light female footsteps approached.

"I'm allowed to be up here, Malou said it was alright." He said.

"You came up here to get away from them, didn't you ? They're still at it, yelling insults at one another."

Charlotte, sitting in the chair next to his, while digging through the bin bag full of booze.

"Did you bring up anything decent ?" She asked.

"The merlot looks good. I just didn't have the courage to go back for a corkscrew."

"No problem."

She waggled her hand about over the top of the bottle, as the cork gently rose up into the air.

"Wow, you guys are better than a Swiss army knife." He said.

Charlotte took a long drink of the wine straight out of the bottle. She handed him the bottle and the wine was superb.

"Do they mean it ?" He asked. "Should we be trying get between them or something ?"

"Olga and Kallina you mean ? No, we leave them to it." Said Charlotte. "This sort of thing isn't that rare and so far at least.....Neither of them has ended up bruised or damaged."

"That's good." He said.

As he handed the merlot back to Charlotte, she took it, but just carried on looking at him.

"There is my room of course." She said. "Another minibar to raid, with no shouting crazy people. Best of all there's a very comfy bed. A weird time of day I know, but it's a weird time of day to be getting drunk on the roof."

"We've earned the right to be weird." He said.

"So.... Does my room interest you?"

"Oh yes, just don't tell all your friends I was easy." He said.

"I'd never dream of saying such a thing."

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