

Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

Chapter 3 – A Rescue

“She had no real idea why, but Ruby’s preferred way of dealing with lifts was crushing. She’d once crushed an entire bank of elevators in Tallinn and if she was being honest with herself, it had been quite enjoyable.”

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Dark out, but the streetlights were good enough for Nari to see most of the roof. The compound below was lit up like a football stadium, though that might not last. Once the attack began the security guards might turn off the outside lights, or they might leave them on. Battles were often like that, far too many unknowns to make an accurate prediction. Nari switched the sight on her sniper rifle to its night setting and her view of the compound changed from warm yellow, to a rather drab green. Drab green was better than seeing nothing in the dark. Plus, her visual acuity was far better than anyone who was totally human. Her phone received a text about the pizza guy needing to be paid. It was them; they were outside the gates to the compound.

‘I hope there’s garlic bread.’

Her reply text that she was in position and ready. The original plan had been to sneak into the compound and try to avoid gunfire and mayhem for as long as possible. All that changed after Ruby had talked it through with everyone. Weapons were new to Nari, her people weren’t allowed access to firearms in North Korea. Even so, she could see the logic in what Spider had worked out and he was being supported by Anna.

“...Yes, he’s right.” Anna had said. “The gun laws in Belgium are tight. No way are the guards Ruby saw, allowed to carry hand guns on their hips. Then there are the assault rifles with no suppressors fitted. Trust me, these guys are as illegal as.....Us.”

“Yeah, they’ll treat using their guns as a last resort.” Spider had said. “Once assault rifles are used, that part of Landen will sound like a war zone. The guards will have to clear out as quickly as we do.”

“And they’ve got two prisoners to take with them.” Sarah had said.

“They’ll have to abandon what sounds like a major facility.” Spider had added. “No doubt Gallaan Industries will deny all knowledge of what happened at their compound.”

Ruby had pondered on it for a few minutes, looking at the ceiling in the way she often did.

“Then that gives us an advantage.” She eventually said. “They’ll hesitate before using their weapons and we won’t.”

Nari was the stopwatch in a way, the fifteen minutes Ruby had allowed for the entire operation, would begin when she fired the first shot. There’d be a bang before then and perhaps the guards might take a few shots at Sophie. The real time the mayhem would begin though, that was when Nari found a valid target to shoot at. The rifle she was using fired high load bullets. It was going to wake half of Landen up when she used it.

“Alright Sophie, time to do your thing.” She muttered.

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There was a small triangle of grass in front of the compound, probably somewhere used by kids during the day. Sophie and the others formed a ragged and spread-out formation across the triangle. Just outside anywhere the compound’s external cameras could see clearly. Ruby had remembered

that the guards were primarily watching the road and the footpaths. They'd just be shadows in the darkness, like a gang of kids getting up to whatever gangs of kids got up to. Sophie moved first, stopping in the centre of the road. There were two street lights giving most of the illumination in front of the gates. She'd been learning from Ruby and Charlotte. She'd never have called herself an expert, but she could use her gifts to crush objects, almost as well as Ruby. She'd already drawn power from the living things around her, there would be dead patches in the grass by morning. Sophie was neat and efficient though, she'd drain no more living energy, than she required. "Impressive yet quiet....With luck." She muttered.

She held up her hand and looked at the nearest street light through her fingers. She pinched forefinger and thumb together, while picturing the lamp being crushed. It worked; she'd never doubted that it would. A little overkill really, the concrete top of the streetlight was crushed, as was the toughened glass cover, together with the bulb inside. A bit of a pop to go with the destruction and a little sparking. She put out the second street light without the popping or the sparking. "Well done, Sophie." She heard Ruby say, directly into her thoughts.

The next part involved levitating and Sophie loved any and every opportunity to use levitation. Her movements looked like flying, as fluid and flawless as bird flight, on a good day. In reality she levitated and used her gifts to move forward or backward. The appearance of fluid bird flight was the result of practise, years upon years of practise. Others might call it flying, but Sophie was a bit of a stickler for accuracy. She went up and over the wall, dropping a grenade on the two cars just to the left of the gates. By the time the grenade went off, Sophie was sat two floors up, on the edge of the building's roof. Like everything Malou had acquired for them, the grenade was quite old. Not Malou's fault of course. Ask for stuff you need in a hurry and you tended to end up with what you can get, rather than what you ideally wanted. The grenade worked well though, one of the expensive cars was on fire. The guards would have to come out and investigate.

"Oh, how I've missed all this." She muttered.

Six months previously, while sitting waiting for a rescue helicopter to arrive. Sophie had decided she'd had enough battles, more than enough for several sensible lifetimes. As she took the elderly Uzi out of her jacket, she had the buzz again, the love of action and using her gifts to the full. She'd seen her file, the one British intelligence had on her. She was described as having sociopathic tendencies. She could understand why they might think that, but she did have feelings. Only for those she cared about though, those who were important to her, which was a fairly small list. Four guards came running out to see what had happened to their expensive and very flashy looking BMWs. They had handguns and did a lot of looking around, while pointing their guns at nothing in particular. The idea that they might really be cops went through her head.

"No, Ruby doesn't make those kinds of mistakes." She muttered.

People rarely look up, but a small girl clattering her way over roof tiles, was pretty hard to miss. As one of the guards aimed at her, she moved herself rapidly to the left. One of Ruby's skills, which she'd taught her. Move too fast, too suddenly and tendons could be damaged, internal organs too. The guard fired and she was no longer there. Before he could try again, there was a loud boom and he fell to the ground. Nari had fired her sniper rifle, the battle had truly begun.

Sophie felt no hatred for the guards as she opened fire with the Uzi. She couldn't see all the guards; the angle of the roof hindered her view. She fired at those she could see, while Nari took care of those she couldn't. There was nothing personal against those defending the compound. They were just an obstacle that needed to be removed.

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Fights in major cities weren't normal for her wunderkinds, though they had fought a major battle in the backstreets of Nairobi. Olga had taught Ruby most of her street skills, though Serge had taught them all how to fight, with a huge variety of weapons. He'd even had a training area in the basement of his house near Marseille. Complete with pop up bad guys and CCTV covering everywhere on the course. There had even been a few robotic devices that actually fought back. It had given Ruby and her kids the kind of training usually reserved for special operations fighters. Not just the kids either, Spider and Sarah had been through every course. Ruby knew the grenade going off wouldn't necessarily get anyone calling the cops. Every city has bangs and crashes as an almost constant ambient symphony. Back fires from cars, noisy motorbikes, right through to people who felt like everyday of the week needed to be celebrated with exploding fireworks. Gunfire though.....The first time Nari fired her rifle, the clock started ticking. Like Sophie, she'd already begun preparing herself for the battle. Nearby gardens, even rats in sewers beneath her feet. Ruby had extracted some of their life force and held it within herself.

"Alright, we have fifteen minutes." She yelled. "Fast in guys and girls and even faster coming out." Ruby never used gestures as part of how she used her gifts. To her, raising her hands to point was like using the sights on a weapon. She thrust at the gates with open palms and concentrated on a switch she knew was in her mind. The heavy steel banded gates were blown off their hinges. One fell straight back, while the other tumbled end over end, before hitting the building.

"That.....Never gets boring." Said Spider.

Ruby never ran, you rarely see soldiers running in news footage. Run and you might miss something and that something might kill you. The front door of the building resisted her gifts, no better than the gates. It had been a while since she'd fought side by side with Charlotte. A little reminder seemed in order.

"Keep them busy up here Charlie." She said. "No fires though, no burning until we're leaving." Charlie just gave her a grin and a nod. Ruby took Spider and Sarah with her, as she headed for the stairs. Delmar too, he could be useful in a tight spot. Anna of course followed her; it would have been impossible to stop her. Everyone else she left upstairs with Charlie. They were going to be a massive and hopefully effective distraction.

"No hesitation, anyone down there with a gun, is an enemy." Said Ruby.

Far easier to walk through doors as a shadow, every door was now going to require opening, or destroying. Ruby used her gift on the door and it flew backwards, only to jam itself across the stairs. A little more power and it became a pile of wood fragments. Somewhere in all the destruction, an alarm had been set off, a loud wailing type of alarm.

"Fuck." Said Sarah.

Ruby didn't think it really mattered, there was a hell of a lot of gunfire behind them. Tell Charlotte you wanted a noisy distraction and you got a noisy distraction. Down the stairs and the next door was really tough, she gave it about twice the power she'd used on the last door. The plan, if it really deserved to be called a plan, was scarily simple. Create mayhem upstairs and the tough looking guys with AR15s, would ignore all normal safety training. They'd used the lift to go upstairs, to see what the hell was going on. It seemed to have worked, the corridor beyond the door was empty, apart from the debris from the door.

"I'll deal with the lift." Said Ruby.

She had no real idea why, but Ruby's preferred way of dealing with lifts was crushing. She'd once crushed an entire bank of elevators in Tallinn and if she was being honest with herself, it had been

quite enjoyable. She crushed the door into the inside of the lift, before crushing everything into a useless clump of metal and wood panelling. Ruby was happy no one was coming down in the lift. "Alright....Anna and Delmar. No bad guys are to come in from the stairs." She said.

"We'll take care of that." Said Delmar.

Which left her with several rooms leading off from the corridor, any of which might contain one of the tough looking guards, with an AR15. Spider was carrying a decent looking automatic, though going by the weapons she'd looked at, it was probably a copy made somewhere obscure. Not that it really mattered, a reliable gun was a reliable gun, that was all that really mattered. Similarly, Sara carried a thirty-eight, a revolver that looked to have been through several wars and the hands of a few uncaring owners.

"Lily is still in here; I can feel her." She said.

The doors to containment one were locked, of course they were. Ruby was beginning to get fed up with locked doors. She used a lot of power and both doors hit the guard waiting behind them. He was knocked to the ground, though he was still reaching for his rifle. Sarah shot him, twice in the chest.

"Lily!" Said Ruby.

Awake and smiling at them, the woman behind the bars looked tired. She also looked quite thin now she was dressed and standing up. Whatever had happened to her, obviously hadn't been pleasant.

"How did you find me?"

"I'll explain later, we're working against the clock." Said Ruby. "Move well away from the door Lily, right into the far corner."

Ruby heard the door to containment three open. Under normal circumstances she'd never have left an uncleared room behind her. Were battles ever normal circumstances though. With a dozen more fighters and another hour to get the job done.....Spider heard the noise and fired several times at the man coming through the door. The guard stumbled a little, until Spider put a bullet into his face.

"Thank you Spider." Said Ruby. "What would I do without you to watch my back."

"There might be more." Said Spider.

"I know."

The cell door was easy, just a little of her gift and it was open. A little twisted, but soon the entire building would be a mass of smoke and flames. Ruby hugged Lily for all of about five seconds.

"Get her out of here, both of you." Said Ruby. "Tell Charlie to begin the burning. I'm going get the man I saw down here."

"You can't do it alone." Said Sarah.

"I'll be fine.....Go on, the pair of you. Look after Lily."

The doors to containment two weren't difficult to smash apart. The guard the other side of them almost got off a shot, before she slammed him into the wall. A little crushing stopped him being a threat, though crushing used on people was a little horrific.

"Him or me." She muttered.

Ruby tried not to look at the mess of blood and shattered bones, that had once been a man. The fifteen minutes were up, she could smell burning coming from the floor above. No messing around, she used full force to turn the cell door into nothing but bent and broken metal. The man under the blanket was only just beginning to take an interest in what was going on.

"Who are you?" She asked.

No answer, he looked to have been given something to keep him docile. Ruby gripped his upper arm and dug her nails in, quite deeply.

“Shit.....Why did you do that ?” He asked.

“Good you’re awake. Do you want to get out of here ?”

“Yes, of course I do.”

“Then follow me and keep your head down.”

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Charlotte wasn’t ready to clean up yet, or even wear clothes. Her burnt skin was at that messy, sticky stage. Everything she touched was left with red, bloody marks. She’d bought several dressing gowns in Paris, all about size 5XL. She had on the blue one and it swamped her, covering everything, which was the idea. Becoming the creature of flames left her with hideous burns, but they’d heal, they always healed. No hair, that had all burned away and that would take a day or so to grow back. Sophie was fairly attentive, though the others still seemed to be avoiding looking at her ruined face. They’d all heard about her gift of fire, though seeing it happen was something different. Charlie could feel fear coming from Anna. Poor Delmar hadn’t been with them in Africa, it was all new to him and he looked horrified.

“There must be something we can do for you ?” He asked.

“I’ll be fine Delmar, I promise. By tonight the worst will have healed and by the time we leave for Paris, I’ll be my old self again. Apart from my hair, which is where my blonde wig will come in useful.”

Being packed into one motel room wasn’t helping, Charlie knew her appearance was a little unsettling to say the least. At one time it terrified her, the burned flesh looking back at her in the mirror. Now she was used to her appearance after becoming a creature of fire.

“Wow, I’m glad you’re on our side Charlie.” Said Spider.

They were jammed into one room to watch the TV together, mainly because not everyone could speak Dutch. Why was Dutch the main language of Belgium ? Charlie didn’t know, though it had been the main topic of discussion over breakfast that morning. The Dutch speakers were giving translations of the main points, complete with arguments about who was giving the correct translation. It all made Charlie feel comfortable in a weird kind of way. They really were the world’s most dysfunctional family.

“There’s nothing left of the place.” Said Sarah. “How do you do that Charlotte ?”

“I get a feeling inside and tap into it. Like getting angry, but way, way past normal anger.”

Her voice was different, or maybe her hearing. She’d bought gowns with hoodies in Paris, so she could hide everything apart from her eyes. Her ears always ended up as lumps of shrivelled flesh, so her changed voice might well be her ears. The result of her gift of fire and burning was on the TV screen. Drone footage probably, of a deep crater inside the compound. A deep smoking crater was all that remained of the Gallaan Industries facility.

“What did that guy just say ?” Asked Spider.

“No survivors have been found.” Said Sophie. “Good, it means the guards who were left alive ran away.”

“Ruby thought they would.” Said Anna.

It was all unfolding on the screen, though the TV news people had most of it wrong. They seemed obsessed with it being middle eastern terrorists, with a local anarchist group as second favourites to have committed the atrocity. Any CCTV recordings would have been destroyed with the facility. No grainy footage of Sophie flying over the wall, no pictures of a sinister looking group waiting outside the gate. The police were rounding up Islamic radicals and local malcontents. Not good for social

harmony, but it meant no one was likely to look twice at a group of tourists touring Europe in rented SUVs.

"I Just hope Nari cleaned up the rooftop." Said Anna.

"Nari is a pro, she will have done what needed doing." Said Charlie.

Charlotte was fed up with watching TV, she fancied a little alone time. Lily had Charlie's room and they were trying to let her get as much sleep as she could. Lily looked malnourished, quite badly malnourished once they'd had time to properly look at her. Sophie had helped her undress and it seemed Lily had quite a few bruises and scars on her body, some quite old and almost healed. It was all a mystery, though one that could wait until Lily was feeling and looking stronger.

One piece of vital knowledge had been learned though. As they were coming out of separate SUVs, Lily and the young guy Ruby had rescued, came face to face. Later Lily had told Sophie that she had never seen the man before and had no idea who he was. Couple that with Ruby feeling a bad vibe from their new guest.....Ruby was currently interrogating him in Sophie's room.

"I'm going to see how Ruby is doing with our new friend." She said.

Charlie could feel the general feeling of relief, as she left the room. Understandable of course, she wasn't a pleasant sight. It wasn't a nice feeling though. Charlie pulled the hoody nice and tight, before going to Sophie's room, which was on the ground floor. She'd seen a few people wandering out to the vending machines in dressing gowns, or less, so she wasn't going to stand out. She knocked on the door three times and Nari opened the door.

"Get anything out of him ?" Asked Charlotte.

"Just a name, Caleb Friedman." Said Nari. "He claims to be an American. Hired by Gallaan as a courier. He said he just took documents from A to B, with no idea what he was carrying."

"That sounds like rubbish."

"Yeah, Ruby still doesn't trust him."

Once they were in the bedroom, the only real room. Nari went and sat on a chair behind Ruby. Nari was a good lurker, a real expert at it. Nari could sit perfectly still with a smile on her face, yet still give off a strong aura of menace.

"Hi Charlie, meet Caleb." Said Ruby.

He was sat on the edge of the bed, while Ruby sat in a chair. Charlie leant against the wall and pulled back her hoody a little. There were times when her scorched and burned appearance could be useful. Poor Caleb Friedman looked terrified.

"I'm grateful for you getting me out of that place but.....Who are you people ?" He asked.

"We need to be certain who you are." Said Ruby. "Let's go through your history again, for Charlie this time. What is your name ?"

"I've already told you."

"Do you want to sleep ? Do you want food ? Co-operate and life will be much more comfortable." Said Ruby.

"My name is Caleb Friedman. I'm an American citizen, you've no right to hold me."

"Good line that, I wonder if it ever works." Said Charlie.

"What is your age ?" Asked Ruby.

"I'm twenty four."

"Any wife or steady relationship ?"

"A girl friend I live with in New York. Her name is Judith, you can check. I have parents in New York too and they'll all probably be thinking I'm dead by now. Can you please believe me, I'm just a guy who was stupid enough to take a job that sounded far too good to be true."

"Tell us about the job with Gallaan ?" Asked Charlie.

"Is that their name ? I was never told. I was paid in cash to take documents from one office to another, often in another country. I think they must have thought I opened one of the packets."

"Did you ?" Asked Ruby. "Did you open one of the packets ?"

"No, never."

Ruby looked at her and smiled.

"Have you ever met anyone so full of shit ?" She asked.

"Some that have been close." Said Charlie. "But Caleb here is in a whole lying shithead league of his own."

"It's all the truth." Said Caleb.

"We can tell if you're lying Caleb." Said Ruby. "No girlfriend, you live alone when you're in the USA. You have a small apartment in Dover, Delaware. Your parents aren't in New York, they moved to Israel while you were still at college. Part of you thinks you're to blame for them moving, though I'm not sure why, not yet."

"Everything out of your mouth is a lie, though your name really does seem to be Caleb Friedman." Added Charlie.

Charlie almost felt sorry for him. Caleb had built up a false persona, probably for many years. No liar though, no matter how good, can convince someone who can pull the truth out of their head.

"There are blocks in his mind." Said Ruby. "An interrogator left them there, a good one."

"Yes, I can feel them too." Said Nari.

"What interrogator ? I've never been interrogated." Said Caleb.

"Let me have a crack at him Ruby." Said Charlie. "I'll find out what's been hidden in his head."

"Alright, just don't lobotomise him, he might be useful."

"Who's getting lobotomised ?" Shouted Caleb.

"Quiet, or we'll stop being quite so friendly." Said Nari.

Charlie had no intention of harming Caleb, though he didn't need to know that. He was obviously a crook, some kind of scam artist. He'd probably taken a job with Gallaan, with the intention of opening their packets of data. That made him more than just useful. She was going to go straight after the big lie, the secret someone had tried very hard to hide. Ruby had taught her how to fish for information, the art of going after the gems, the key memories that were sometimes worth millions. First Charlie pushed back her hood and loosened her gown, before taking the seat where Ruby had been sitting.

"Sorry Caleb, do my burns bother you ?" She asked.

"No, not at all."

Another lie, his head was full of feelings, mostly fear and disgust. Strangely she picked up a little lust. It seemed that seeing just a little of her charred cleavage was pressing his buttons. Good, she could work with those feelings.

"Now Caleb, why were Gallaan holding you prisoner ? If you'd seen something you weren't supposed to have seen, why not just kill you ?"

"I have no idea."

"Oh, come on.....All the time and trouble of putting you in that cell. Expensive too, all those guards and security systems. All large corporate conglomerates look hard at expenses these days. They could have put you up at a hotel in Vegas for that kind of money and bought a few tickets for shows. Why was Caleb Friedman so fucking important ?"

"I keep telling you, I have no fucking idea." He yelled.

Often getting the right trigger word for a memory was luck, sometimes intuition. At very rare times it seemed to pop into Charlie's head from nowhere. She leant forward and grabbed his hands in hers. A little squeeze and he had her blood on his hands, her almost congealed, but still squelchy blood. A little more pressure and he'd be feeling every detail of her burned flesh.

"Remember Caleb, stop hiding from yourself." She said.

It was like a small explosion in his head, as the barrier went down. He's suffered severe trauma once, or he's witnessed it, the two often left the same emotional scars. Caleb went backwards onto the bed, breathing hard and crying. Charlotte wasn't totally immune to the feelings sometimes woken up in others. Caleb's memories had felt like being underneath a waterfall of sorrow.

"Wow, did you feel all that, Ruby?" She asked.

"Yes, all of it.....It explains why Gallaan kept him in that cell. He refused to tell them the truth, because the truth had been hidden, even from him."

"Who did this to me?" Asked Caleb.

"The people you were stealing secrets for, Gallaan's secrets. Your memories were locked and distorted, like running a scalpel over a vinyl recording. I saw a man's face and bits of a city I recognised. Whoever did this to you, it happened in Budapest. Though....I still don't understand why you're still alive. A bullet in the head would have been easier."

"I can see that face too.....I have no idea who he is." Said Caleb.

Caleb had been a liar and a scammer, but Charlie still felt sorry for him. Did he have the same bruises and scars as Lily? She suspected he did.

"So, what do we do with him?" Asked Nari.

"He won't survive long if we simply chuck him out onto the street." Said Charlie.

"Do I get a say in this?" Asked Caleb.

"I don't cart prisoners around Europe, or run a conscript army, Caleb." Said Ruby. "We are going to Budapest to see a friend though, one who might know something about your past. She does seem to know everything that happens in Hungary. If you like, you can come with us, your choice?"

"I still don't trust him." Said Nari.

"Let him answer." Said Ruby.

"Well, I've nowhere else to go.....So, yes."

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Sarah had been so pleased to hear they were flying from Paris to Budapest, that she'd volunteered to help deep clean the SUVs. There could be no chance of leaving fingerprints and DNA in the vehicles, even if there was an infinitesimal chance of it being looked for, much less found. She'd driven one of them back to the hire company and apart from flirting with her a little, the guy behind the desk had barely woken up. No nice new SUVs in Budapest, that was where things might get a little iffy. Ruby had mentioned Olga providing transport at her end, which could mean anything from a couple of top of the range Mercs, or two elderly Skodas. There was no knowing with Olga. Sarah knocked on the door and waited, until Lily came to the door.

"Sorry did I wake you?" She asked. "I was in the kitchens and saw your tray."

"No, come in. I'm feeling hungry and oh, that smell of bacon."

"Malou said they do the best English breakfast in Paris and I believe her." Said Sarah.

For Sarah it felt like going back to the good old days, complete with an ever present feeling of danger. There were now two guests at Malou's hotel who were probably being looked for by Gallaan and perhaps others were hunting them too. Lily was seen as a source of high-tech energy weapons, but Caleb's worth to anyone, was less sure. Personally, she didn't like him or trust him, which was a

fairly common feeling among Ruby's small army. Lily had been hungry; she was going at her breakfast as though she hadn't eaten in days. She still had a long way to go to look strong again, but the colour had returned to her cheeks.

"I take it Ruby is using Villand's people to watch the street outside the hotel?" Asked Lily.

"Yes, over a dozen walking through, right round the clock."

"They're good, I stood at the front windows last night and couldn't spot them."

"It's not just them." Said Sarah. "Xue knows people and so does Malou. There are people mingling with the customers, just in case. Personally though, I think that if anyone with bad intentions does get into the hotel, Sophie will get to them before they've taken a dozen steps."

"Oh yes, Sophie.....Small but deadly." Said Lily. "My money is on Sophie too."

They laughed and although she's promised Ruby not to, she had to ask.

"I know it must have been hell, in that cell I mean. If you ever want someone to talk to, you only have to ask."

"Oh, one day I might take you up on that. They wear you down with too little sleep for days, followed by drugging you to sleep all the time. Too much sleep is terrible Sarah, it makes you hallucinate, or it might have been the drugs. Then there are the blows and the cuts small enough to hurt, but not bad enough to cause serious damage. I felt so tired.....I'd have told them anything in the end, just to make it stop. I didn't, though I would have done, if it had gone on for much longer. I know you don't like Caleb, but he went through everything I went through."

"I just get a feeling, Lily.....He makes my skin crawl."

"Just give him a chance. Please Sarah, promise me you'll do that."

"Alright, I will. Did you get your new passport yet?"

"Yes, Ruby has some incredible connections, maybe better than Foxy's in some ways. I'm keeping my first name, but I'll be Lily Yates when we travel, a twenty four year old realtor from Canada."

Sarah had to see the fake passport of course, which looked perfect. They had to laugh at the dreadful picture, but all passport photos looked hideous. Sarah always thought her own looked as though she was the guilty person in a police line-up.

"I heard, actually we all heard rumours that Foxy was going to retire." Said Sarah.

"What, Sir Edwin Fox retire as spymaster general. Never, ever ! He just puts rumours out to keep the opposition on their toes, whoever the opposition happens to be. He has a thing about his office rug, Sarah. Every time they convince him to carry on for another few years, he gets a better rug for his office floor. I honestly think those rugs are his driving force."

"Ruby mentioned that he always gets a better painting on the wall too."

"Yes, he'll end up with a genuine Cezanne one day, just you wait and see."

"I'm glad you're going with us to Budapest." Said Sarah.

"At least that far, there may be answers there for both us in Hungary, Caleb and myself. I have to go into the British Embassy in the morning for a debriefing. A third level manager in charge of visas, who is really the Secret Intelligence liaison person for France. If all is well, they'll say it's alright for me to take a prolonged kind of sabbatical."

"Will it be alright Lily ? Supposing they want you to go back to Britain ?"

"Yes, I think Ruby was afraid they might try to nab me, so she's coming with me. I have to go; my mum isn't too well and I don't want them pestering her."

"Do you think they might ? Grab you, I mean ?" Asked Sarah.

“Once I’d have said never, not in a million years. Now though....I think they suspect it was me who gave energy weapons to Ruby, which then ended up with Max in Mogadishu. Fucking around in that part of the world is seen as rocking the boat you see.....Not quite cricket.”

“Oh, I see....I think.”

“Don’t worry Sarah, I’m sure they’ll let me out again. After a few threats and warnings have been given.”

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