

Ruby 3

Chapter 17 – The Fortress

““Install any phone app and you might as well be opening up your entire life to the guy who wrote it.”

Or so a government IT guy had once told her. He should have known of course, he was a senior guy with the FSB, the Russian Federal Security Service.”

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Lily had enjoyed the hand to hand combat part of the tough guy course more than she'd anticipated. She'd begun to feel her muscle tone improve and her stamina. She was quicker too, far faster on her feet than most of the men on the course. Plus, if she was being totally honest, some of the guys she was partnered up with, weren't unpleasant to get close to. One or two had definitely caught her eye. Even the unwashed body smell that sometime assailed her nostrils, worried her less than it would have in the past.

“The tough guy course is doing what it's supposed to do I guess....I'm toughening up.”

She'd told Foxy when he'd asked for a progress report.

“But ideally you'd like to be handling weapons ?” He'd asked her.

“I'm glad I stuck with the rough stuff, but yes.....I'd like to start learning how to handle small arms.”

He must have wangled something with MI6, the people he usually referred to as the swine down in Vauxhall. Her course was being personalised for her, restructured to alternate between the physical fighting and the weapons training. There was an indoor gunnery range below the converted hotel in Vauxhall, but to fire the really fun stuff, she needed to drive to an outdoor range.

“Crap..... How can I get lost in Kent ?” She muttered. “I'm not that far from our office.”

There was no sign saying ‘To the MI6 gunnery range,’ it wasn't on any maps. A farm in the middle of lots of other farms, just a few miles from Ashford. The SatNav in her beloved mini had never been great and kept telling her to turn left into a duck pond.

“Oh..... This is ridiculous.”

She'd printed a map from Google back at the office and put a red cross where Meadows Farm was supposed to be. There was the red cross on her map, just the other side of the rather large pond. Lily turned her car around, after remembering passing a lane so muddy and narrow, that she'd written it off.

“Maybe finding the damn place is some kind of test.”

It sounded a good theory, until she remembered her SatNav's inability to find quite a few other locations, including the entire town of Rochester. The lane looked so muddy, that she thought it couldn't possibly be the right road. But she'd already tried every other road, lane and track. Ten minutes later she saw the sign for Meadows Farm. Any idea of the location being covert, seemed ruined by the large car park, with more cars than the average dairy farm was likely to have.

“At least I'm not late.”

The place began to have a definite government feel, after she saw the sign for Reception and Registration. Foxy had told her there was a clay pigeon shoot nearby, to mask the sounds of gunfire. To her at least, the idea of shotguns masking automatic weapons fire sounded crazy.

“I bet all the locals know it's the MI6 gun range.” She muttered.

"I'm sure they do. We were asked for a donation for the church roof last winter."

It was him, the rather grumpy instructor who'd given Foxy and her a few basic instructions in using the weapon designed to kill the rogue Das Geheimnis. His grey hair and constant frown had been quite depressing. He seemed like a different man, now he had a smile on his face.

"Sorry.....I didn't see you there." She said.

"Don't worry, your minor indiscretion is safe with me. I heard you were doing the full tough guy course. Quite impressive, for someone who usually sits behind a desk all week."

"I'm actually enjoying the rough stuff more than I thought." She said. "I was even thinking of signing up for the regular refresher courses."

"But ideally you want to get your competency sign off for small arms?"

"Yes.....Though...."

"You can tell me, I never blab.... Unless you're planning to slaughter someone in the government of course."

He had that kind of smile, the sort she trusted.

"I really want to learn how to use the rogue killer.....Use it properly I mean."

"Rogue killer?.....Ahh, the energy weapon. Could you use it? Be honest, if it came to it. Could you take it off the wall and fire it at an attacker?"

"My boss asked me that. Yes, I definitely could."

"Most would run around in circles, firing wildly..... If they fired at all."

"I wouldn't."

Still the smile, though he looked to be thinking about something.

"Can I have your phone?" He asked.

That caught her on the hop. Usually only young guys in pubs asked her that, the sort who fancied their chances. Lily gave him her iPhone and watched him tap a number into her contact list.

"Bill, I'm on there as Bill." He said.

"I'm Lily."

"I know..... You're here for assault rifle basics today. Once you feel comfortable with conventional weapons, give me a call. I'll take you right through how to use the rogue killer."

"Thank you."

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Olga was glad Charlotte had come with her to get Luca settled in her house. The young trainee doctor had actually screamed when they'd carried her out of the car and into her house. Her neighbours knew her of course and had a pretty good idea what she did for a living. No one was going to have the balls to call the cops or complain.

"It's probably still the effect of the sedatives." Said Pablo.

"Leave me alone.....I want to go home." Shrieked Luca.

"Calm....No one is going to hurt you." Said Charlotte.

Some sort of low level whammy, as Charlotte touched the girl's forehead. All was quiet and peaceful at last, as Luca was placed on the bed in her guest bedroom. Actually it was her only spare bedroom with sheets on the bed.

"Don't touch me." Muttered Luca, as Olga pulled a sheet over her.

"Crap.... We'll need an anaesthetic dart to get her undressed and into bed." Said Olga.

"I could knock her right out, but I'd prefer not to." Said Charlotte.

"What the hell did those bastards do to her?" Asked Jai.

"I can find out, though it needs to be a male free environment in here." Said Charlotte.

"You heard the lady." Said Olga. "Anyone with a dick needs to leave the room. Go down to the kitchen and have breakfast or something."

Once the guys had left, Charlotte pulled the sheet back and looked Luca over, as if deciding where to begin. Olga's mind began to work overtime, thinking about what Charlotte might be intending to do.

"Are we really going to examine her.....Intimately?" She asked. "It seems a bit brutal, considering what she might have been through."

Charlotte simply smiled at her and shook her head.

"I gave her a quick look over in the car." Said Charlie. "There's no obvious signs of her being raped. Not conclusive of course, but the men were hired professionals. Plus they were probably too terrified of Arturo to harm Luca. The beating though..... That seems weird. I'm going to try and trigger a few memories, so this might get noisy."

Charlotte lay on the bed next to Luca. It wasn't exactly cuddling, when Charlotte put one arm around the student's shoulders and touched her head with the other.

"You're safe Luca; no one here will hurt you." Said Charlie.

"Please.....I just want to go home."

Luca's eyes were still shut, as though she was talking in her sleep.

"Home isn't safe Luca..... Here is safe. We can protect you. I promise to protect you."

Luca sat up suddenly, her eyes wide open.

"Why isn't my home safe?"

"There are some bad people Luca." Said Olga. "We can protect you though."

Screaming, lots of screaming. Ear splitting screaming, until Charlie worked her magic on the girl. Charlie wasn't happy and Olga knew it was her fault.

"Sorry Charlie, I realise that was the wrong thing to say."

"I need to go deeper into her memories Olga. It might be better if I talked to her on my own."

"I understand.... Sorry."

Olga said sorry at least another three times. It wasn't in her nature to apologise even once, but the way poor Luca had screamed. She was busy anyway, buying tickets and booking hotels in Mexico City. Not that they intended to use the airline tickets, or stay in the comfortable four star hotels. The paper trail had been hidden, though Arturo's people would quickly discover it. Mexico City was a ruse, a complete red herring. There was even a second and far harder trail to find, private planes and mercenaries waiting in Belize. They'd be paid of course, Olga never left burning bridges behind her.

"Are we still going in via Guatemala?" Pablo asked, as she walked into the kitchen.

"Yes, a day in Guatemala City to arm up and then a hell of a long drive."

"Oh....I hate Guatemala City." Said Jai. "Everyone is a crook and the hookers are all ugly."

"Then stay away from them." She said.

The room she referred to as the dining room, was really a dumping ground for books she wanted to read one day and furniture that had come with the house. A weird room, almost a hoarder's wet dream of a room. In one corner there was a little order. It was the corner where an old laptop sat on a desk. It was where she organised her business and communicated with those needing her services. "Oh, Shit.....Three hundred and two unanswered emails." She muttered.

Two thirds would be instant deletes. It still left her with a lot to catch up on. Going away usually left her with a lot of firefighting when she got home. Emails could be diverted to her phone, but she didn't trust the privacy of any cellphone.

"Install any phone app and you might as well be opening up your entire life to the guy who wrote it."

Or so a government IT guy had once told her. He should have known of course, he was a senior guy with the FSB, the Russian Federal Security Service.

An hour later and Olga was down to a mere hundred and six emails waiting to be dealt with.

“Wow, you’re looking much better.” She heard Pablo say.

“Yes, Charlotte explained it all to me.” Said Luca. “I could hardly say no.... Not with Olga relying on me.”

Olga could move quickly on her long slender legs, if there was a need. She was out into the corridor in a couple of seconds. Luca still had her grubby clothes on, but there was something about her. An erectness to her posture, a smile in her eyes. Definitely not the screamer from hell she’d left with Charlotte.

“Nice to see you back to your old self.” Said Olga. “What has Charlie told you ?”

“She explained that my home isn’t safe Olga. You need a trained medic for a dangerous situation in Mexico, and you’re a man down. It was obvious really.....I’ll go to Mexico with you.”

Pablo was looking at Luca and rolling his eyes. It definitely wasn’t the usual anxious Luca stood in her hallway, the Luca who hated Olga’s business and everything that went with it. Charlotte had done something to the girl, something massive. Olga could live with that, as long as it didn’t wear off somewhere inconvenient.

“Well..... Yes, we are one person short.” Said Olga. “Taking you with us does make it easier to protect you.”

“Having a trained medic with us would be nice.” Said Pablo.

“I’ll add my vote to that.” Said Jai, from the kitchen door.

Olga was about to give them Ruby’s now famous, ‘we’re not a democracy’ speech. It made sense in a weird way though. Having Luca there might save someone’s life. As for the girl ? She’d definitely be far safer than being left in a hotel room out in the suburbs of Budapest. Olga switched into business mode.

“Thank you Luca, your presence will be a big help. I’ll pay you of course, your usual daily rate.

Clothes..... You’ll need something to travel in, at the very least. Pablo can take you shopping, right now. Clothes and all the essentials for a trip abroad.”

“I’ll need a passport.”

“No problem, we’re good at getting official documents.” Said Pablo.

Definitely got at in some way. The old Luca would have snorted at that, before saying something rude and storming out of the room. The new Luca gave Pablo a knowing grin.

“Use the company gold card Pablo, get her what she needs.... Actually take Jai too, just in case. Keep her safe.... Make sure she’s safe.”

“Don’t worry Boss.” Said Pablo.

There was one last way to see if the old Luca was still hiding in there somewhere. A question, just a single, simple question.

“It might be useful once we’re in Mexico Luca..... Can you use a gun ?”

“No, but I’m a quick learner.”

“Good, I’ll show her the basics tonight.” Said Pablo.

Definitely, definitely put under the whammy by Charlie, no disputing it. Olga was down to just twenty two unanswered emails, when Charlotte put her head around the door.

“Do you fancy a coffee ?” She asked.

That was it ! No asking if she liked the new Luca, or a word of explanation.

“Yes to the coffee. Now..... What the hell did you do to Luca ?”

“Why ? Don’t you like her now ? Far better than the scared screaming version. And it will be nice to have a trained doctor on the team.”

“That’s what the guys said.”

“I thought you’d be happy with the new confident Luca.” Said Charlie. “I even talked to her about the advantages of having..... Flexibility when it came to obeying the law.”

It all made sense, yet Olga still didn’t like it. One big question kept fixing itself in her mind, like a huge squashed bug on a dirty windscreen.

“Will the effect Last ? We don’t need screaming Luca returning when we’re stood outside The Fortress.”

“Yes, I pushed old traits in deep and pulled others out. It took a while, but this is Luca now. She’ll be like this forever.”

“You promise.”

Charlotte held up her hand, three fingers upright.

“I Promise..... Scout’s honour.”

Probably a Spider saying, it sounded like one of his. Charlie probably had no idea what a boy scout was, but the answer was acceptable. Another question still troubled Olga.

“Did those bastards interfere with her ? You know what I mean.”

“No. I found no memories of anything like that. They beat her because she kept fighting back.”

“Bastards.”

“Now they’re all dead bastards.” Said Charlie.

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Tororo in Eastern Uganda looked to be quite a thriving town. Not that Ruby did more than give it a passing look. Borders too had been largely ignored, though she had heard their vehicles had been caught up in the queue to get from Kenya to Uganda. With so many of the thirteen walking with her, setting up and maintaining what Ruby called a ‘we’re not here field,’ was easy. Not invisibility, though it had the same effect. Whoever saw them, didn’t see them, or at least their brains didn’t register the fact. Past Tororo she led them, going a little east and a few miles further north. Her mind was now focused on just one thing, finding where to dig down to the sacred stone the Arbiters had told her about.

“.....in many ways leaving Kenya has made my position easier.” Said Rory.

Walking all day and Todd to keep her mind off things at night, she’d begun to trudge across Africa like a zombie. She’d heard very little of what Rory had said to her. She stopped walking and yelled at Anna, simply because she was quite close.

“Tell them we’re taking a quick break Anna. Half an hour, no more.”

Ruby had a device to give her a seat, no matter what the terrain was like. Second hand, Spider had found it in a travellers shop in Kimaeti, in Kenya. A sort of shooting stick with a tripod foot and a fold out seat. She sat down and looked at Rory.

“I apologise Rory. I heard everything you said, though very little of it stuck. Begin again and I promise to actually listen this time.”

Ishel arrived before Rory managed to utter a word. Tlal was with her of course, the two of them seemed joined at the hip. It was a hot dry day, just like the previous three or four days. The rogues had stopped wearing the extra layers of clothing to conceal the strangeness of their bodies. Ruby was used to seeing Ishel in her uncovered natural state. Rory was different, she could feel the revulsion in his mind. Ishel would be feeling it too, but there was no way to avoid that.

“Is there a problem ?” Asked Ishel. “We’re not due a break for at least two hours.”

"I was about to inform Ruby about my status in Uganda." Said Rory.

He said it in a get lost, this is private tone. Not that Ishel would take any notice of that. Ruby quite liked being the only one of them who was able to sit down.

"Ishel can hear what you have to say Rory." She said.

He didn't seem keen on the idea. Ishel and her people had killed a few guards at Foxy's office, so they were never going to be friends. Ruby nodded at Rory.

"It's all right Rory..... Repeat what you told me.... Please."

"Officially we came here to run training sessions for the Kenyan police." He said. "Purely a cover, to avoid embarrassment for the Kenyan government if things go wrong. A fight with the wrong people and London can claim I acted on my own."

"By wrong people you mean a fight with the Kenyan border police, or something like that ?" Asked Ishel.

"Yes, something like that..... Anyway, by crossing into Uganda I'm now released from any requirement to act like a member of British armed forces."

"What exactly does that mean ?" Asked Ishel.

Rory didn't want to answer and it was tempting to let him give Ishel a metaphorical poke in the eye. They all needed each other though, whether they realised it or not.

"You might as well tell her Rory, or she'll pester you until you do."

"Just by being here, my men and I are effectively going rogue. No offence."

"None taken." Said Ishel.

"That makes it easier for us to engage any threat we might meet. No problem with the British army invading an old colonial country, or anything like that. You need help..... We can give it."

"That is good to know." Said Ruby.

"I suppose so." Said Ishel, in a tone that would have withered a lesser man than Rory.

Ruby drank from her water bottle and enjoyed the awkward silence for the next twenty minutes.

The wait had been useful, her unconscious mind hadn't been idle. As she stood up, it was as if a huge marker had been placed in the ground, less than two miles away.

"Our long walk is over." She said, pointing. "Over there and quite close.... We're almost there."

"Can I tell everyone ?" Asked Anna.

"Yes, tell them we're nearly there."

Happiness can breed chaos, even if it was a chaos of cheering people. By the time Ruby reached the point where the sacred stone was calling out to her, her people were strung out for a mile or more behind her. Only Sophie was with her to see the underwhelming scenery.

"So, this is it ? I expected something....."

"Admit it Sophie, you expected a bolt of lightning and a pillar of fire....At least."

"That would have been nice."

The terrain was generally flat and reasonably green. No large areas of grass, though well grown bushes surrounded the area where Ruby intended to make a very deep hole in the ground. There was a settlement a mile or so to the east, which might be a blessing or a nuisance. Ruby could see several roads that were just dusty tracks and the roof of a church.

"We've got neighbours, let's hope they're friendly." Said Ruby.

"I bet they aren't..... Especially after we set up a mining camp."

Ruby simply looked at the ground, as everyone gradually grouped around her. Being exact was impossible, though the sacred stone had to be at least two miles below her feet. A daunting and

time consuming dig for traditional miners. Ruby had no intention of using the usual deep mining methods.

"Crap..... Is this it ?" Asked Anna.

"We've been there, done that." Said Sophie. "Yes, we all expected something more dramatic."

"Imagine it with a busy mining camp right where we're standing." Said Spider.

"I called Doc and gave him our position for the vehicles." Said Anna. "They'll be here in a couple of hours."

No, it was over two miles, Ruby felt more confident about her very unscientific calculations.

"Two point three miles." She said. "We need to dig down two point three miles."

More than a little nervous laughter, as they all thought about what she'd said.

"That's impossible, we need to find another way to break the seals." Said Ishel.

"Even expert miners would need years to dig that deep Ruby." Said Rory. "Then there's the sheer size of the operation and the resources required. Half the Ugandan army will show up before you're a few hundred yards into the ground."

Sophie alone seemed to understand what she intended to do.

"It'll be dangerous Ruby, especially right on top of a natural fault line." Said Sophie.

"I know, but they told me the stone is the only way in."

"If anyone can do the impossible it's Ruby." Said Spider.

A cheer, a genuine loud and long round of cheers. Knowing they had faith in her mattered, as she might be about to risk all their lives.

"Well need a camp set up." She said. "Anna will take a team into Tororo once the vehicles are here.

They can play at being tourists. We'll need all the usual things to set up a long term camp. If in doubt ask Rory, he's likely to be the expert on such matters."

"I don't speak Swahili." Said Anna.

"I do, though most Ugandan's speak English." Said Todd. "I can go with her Ruby, if you want me to ?"

"Yes, that sounds like a good idea.....Just remember to behave like tourists. Choose any others you want to take. Now..... Who did I designate this week, to know where Kallina is at all times ?"

"That was me." Said Fabio. "She now hates me, but I do know where she is. Kallina went to check on Max, but she'll be back in an hour or so."

There was a real need in her to issue orders to everyone, a desire to control everyone. It was ridiculous though, they were quite capable of looking after themselves, even in Uganda.

"I'll need Kallina and Eugenie from London, perhaps Charlotte if she's available." She said. "Getting everyone here may take a few days, so set up camp, visit the town and keep yourselves busy for a while.....Oh, and avoid the settlement to the east, I have a bad feeling about them."

"What about local currency ?" Asked Fabio.

"I guarantee they'll be more than happy to accept US Dollars." Said Todd.

The vehicles hadn't arrived, but Ruby had hoped the crowd would at least start to disperse. She needed to stare at the ground for a while, which was going to feel a little odd with a crowd around her.

"That's it, we'll talk again over dinner." She said.

"I'll see if I can buy a gas cylinder powered barbecue." Said Anna.

Spider went away with Anna, trying desperately to be picked as part of the first team to play at being tourists in Tororo. There was a group around her who still seemed resistant to hints to go away.

"You can't leave it like that." Said Ishel. "You've obviously got a plan that doesn't involve years of digging. You need to tell us what it is?"

"Yes, we won't tell anyone." Said Sarah. "There's no one to blab to out here."

A little laughter, though Sarah had a point. The plan was going to sound so bizarre though, so dangerous. Ruby was worried they might lose faith in her again.

"There will be some digging involved." Said Ruby. "Mainly though, I intend to harness the forces of nature to do the heavy work. We're going to use the winds, the sky and the clouds to dig our hole in the ground, and dig it quickly. One night is all it will take."

"You're going to do what Charlotte did to Jingdao Island aren't you?" Asked Fabio.

"I am, the same forces used by Kallina in North Korea. It will be dangerous because of where we are. The Great Rift is a genuine rift, a place where the Earth's crust is constantly being pulled apart. Too much energy applied in the wrong place.....We will have to be very careful."

"Digging a two mile deep hole in one night." Said Ishel. "That's impossible."

"For now, please trust me on this." Said Ruby. "Once the others arrive from London, I can tell you more. It will work, we've used these kinds of forces before."

No one looked totally convinced, not even the wunderkinds. They'd seen it before though, or had at least heard first-hand accounts. Ruby could understand the doubts, a two mile hole in the ground, dug in a single eight hour night.... It did sound impossible.

"I've seen what energy there is up where the atmosphere gets close to the edge of space." Said Sophie. "It was as if a nuclear weapon had detonated over the South China Seas. Within hours, every satellite in the area was looking at what was left of Jingdao Island."

Sophie said it with such authority, so much gravitas. No one dared to naysay her, or ask any further questions. Once everyone had wandered off, she looked for Sophie.

"Your anecdote came at just the right moment Sophie. Thank you."

"I just hope we don't end up splitting Africa in two."

"So do I Sophie, so do I."

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Being in the mirror room at the top of the sacred tower was a first order crime. Arbiter Nazili Anso had caught Gratentia there quite by accident, though he did accept there might not be such a thing as accidental luck, or coincidences. The Gods had been quiet for a disturbingly long period of time, yet they were still there. On a good day he was almost certain he could feel them. Perhaps the Gods had made him check the mirror room at that precise moment?

"Immolation is the punishment for even being here Gratentia." He said. "Though I doubt if the Gods would want your tarnished soul."

Gratentia was an ancient female, one of the few who could still remember when their world had been a glorious place to live. Powerful and the head of what Nazili thought of as the resistance movement. A dangerous opponent, but she didn't have the powers of an Arbiter of the one true faith. His mental powers alone held her fixed to the wall and unless he released her, it was where she'd probably die.

"You're planning to let them in here, the outsiders." Screamed Gratentia. "You're the traitors, you and that witch Heranza. You are the traitors, not me. Let them in and the curse will be set free."

"Not necessarily." Said Nazili. "Their leader has immense power."

"Don't be an idiot Nazili. Once they penetrate the seal it will be the end of everything."

He looked at the mirror and it was still looking at where Gratentia had aimed it. She'd been watching them, the outsiders looking for the sacred stone. The powerful one called Ruby was stood there, simply looking at the ground.

"How did you set the mirror?" He asked. "Only an Arbiter has those skills."

No answer, just an infuriating smugness. He could torture an answer out of her. An incinerated arm would loosen her tongue. He hated such things though, unless it was a matter of life or death. The answer was probably the age and dilapidated state of what remained of their once great civilisation. Everything was deteriorating at an accelerating rate. Little seemed to work as well as it once had. The mirror also gave the ability to release them, the Nagala in their nest. Gratentia had opened the mental gateway, but the mirror showed him a cavern full of bones.

"Why is she still alive?" Asked Arbiter Heranza Methun.

Bellowing questions as soon as she entered the room. The anger was upon her again, no one was immune to it. The anger could sharpen the wits of some, though generally its effect was detrimental to those it afflicted.

"I was waiting for you." Replied Nazili.

"So, the other traitor arrives." Said Gratentia.

"Why is this one still able to speak?" Asked Heranza.

A hand gesture was all it took from Heranza. Skin grew over their prisoner's mouth, leaving her making grunting noises, but no words.

"We need to question her Heranza." He said. "Calm yourself, control the anger.....She has released them, all of them, the Nagala."

"The Nagala must all be dead by now. No living thing could survive that long without food. They must have been dead for countless millennia."

"I'm not sure..... The mirror shows a cavern full of bones, but there was something." He said. "When I first looked, something moved, something running, right on the edge of the image. She'll know, she was looking at the mirror when I caught her."

"Then she needs to talk."

Heranza had her arm back, a ball of flame already forming in her hand. Nazili did the unthinkable, he used physical force against a fellow Arbiter. He held her arm and used enough strength to make Heranza scream.

"Forgive me old friend, but Gratentia will be no use to us as a pile of ash. You need to control the anger..... Do you understand?"

He shook her, quite violently. Nazili then kissed his fellow Arbiter of the one true faith on her cheek, to indicate sorrow for his actions. Heranza's eyes briefly flashed anger, before he felt the anger leave her. She gave him a slight bow.

"I should be the one apologising to you." She said. "For a moment the anger turned me into a mindless brute."

"I suffer from the anger too..... We must watch one another. Now....Undo what you've done to Gratentia's mouth, so that we can question her."

Not even a hand gesture required, Heranza simply nodded her head in the direction of their prisoner.

"You should be ashamed of yourselves." Yelled Gratentia. "If the outsiders break the seal, all the lives sacrificed by our ancestors will have been for nothing. You're not Arbiters, you're traitors against the faith."

Perhaps an attempt to provoke them and gain a quick death ? It wasn't going to work, the anger had been cleansed from them both, at least for a few days.

"Talk to me Gratentia." Said Nazili. "What did you see in the nest ? Were many of the Nagala still alive ?"

Mental probing wasn't reliable against a truly ancient female, they became too good at blocking, or filling their head with meaningless noise. She had to tell him, and he had to rely on his instincts to know if it was the truth.

"Why would I tell you ? I know you're going to kill me, no matter what I say."

"We can decide the manner of your death." Said Heranza.

"It will be death by immolation, the law requires it." Said Nazili. "You can be put into a deep sleep though, the fire made to burn quick and hot. Not completely painless of course, but the best you can hope for."

Poor Gratentia, the look on her face showed that she finally understood the seriousness of her situation. Being leader of the rebellion was one thing, but suffering the consequences was something entirely different.

"I think she'll talk if we burn her slowly." Said Heranza. "Take a few hours over it..... We can start with her feet and move up."

"I'm reliably informed that a slow burning is like being slowly boiled alive." Added Nazili.

He knew she was going to start talking, probably before her conscious mind was aware of the decision taken by her unconscious. He also knew she was about to tell him the truth.

"About a quarter of the Nagala nest was alive." She said. "I was watching them head into the caves when you caught me here. There's nothing you can do, nothing can survive their attack, nothing."

"Is she telling the truth ?" Asked Heranza.

"Yes."

He touched their prisoner's forehead, sending her into a deep sleep. Pain would wake her, but he was going to use the hottest flames of immolation possible. Tempting to let Heranza have the catharsis of killing any enemy, but in her current state..... She'd enjoy it more than was healthy. It took several incantations to fill his hands with white hot flames, and several more to increase their temperature. Gratentia screamed just once, before becoming nothing but a tiny pile of black ash. "We can tell the faithful of her treachery tonight." He said. "Her death will serve as a deterrent against any further dissent. So many Nagala released though.....I think Ruby is likely to die, along with all her friends."

"There's nothing we can do, the Nagala will be in the cave system by now. When they dig down that far.....Nothing can survive the Nagala, nothing."

"I know you're right Heranza....I just wish there was something we could do."

"There is a way, we both know there is a way to warn her."

"Unreliable though."

"Better than doing nothing."

"You're right, we'll try together after nightfall."

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The vehicles had been waiting for them on the Mexican side of the border with Guatemala, not far from Chetumal. Old clunky vehicles that had been checked over and were more reliable than they looked. Bought rather than hired, they even had a few extra registration plates in case they ran into trouble. There had been an argument over the price, when they'd picked up medical supplies in León, but as Olga had pointed out.

“No use bringing a doctor if we don’t give her the right tools.”

Not a serious argument, Charlotte has persuaded the administrator of the clinic not be greedy. She was making a hundred percent profit after all, on the stolen medical supplies. After that picking up weapons a few miles south of Durango had been a pleasure. Professionals in Durango, suppliers of guns and explosives who prided themselves on getting it done with as little drama as possible. Durango had given them a chance to take a rare two hour lunch break.

“I really didn’t think we’d get to Culiacán without some sort of trouble.” Said Pablo.

“Shush.... Don’t temp lady luck.” Said Igor.

Charlie was driving, which had given him a chance to take a nap. All those miles without stopping had taken its toll on him. Not just him, Pablo knew everyone was fed up with the heat, bad roads and trying to sleep on the move.

“This is a beautiful city.” Said Charlie.

“It is, but.....I grew up near here.” Said Jai. “On a bad day.....They do say if the devil owned hell and Culiacán. He’d live in hell and rent out Culiacán.”

“No one is giving us a second look.” Said Pablo. “Even with a red head driving.”

“I look friendly behind the wheel.” Said Charlotte. “Girls are harmless, everyone knows that.”

“Yeah..... Right.” Said Igor.

They had three clunky vehicles for seven of them. That meant they could load up with weapons and equipment without the weight causing the bodywork to rub on the tyres. The lead car, currently being driven by the red head, even had stickers for the local soccer team on the boot lid, Dorados de Sinaloa. No one was giving them a second glance, though it had been down to careful preparations, rather than luck. They looked like locals, they looked like they belonged.

“Take the road out to Mojolo.” Said Pablo. “Do you want me to take over driving ?”

“You don’t trust me not to get lost.” Said Charlie. “Come on, admit it.”

“Fuck.... Are you in my head ?”

“No, you’re a guy and I’m beginning to understand guys. Don’t worry, I know where to go.”

He trusted her, though it was still a relief when she took the right road to get to the top of the hill. Road was actually too kind a word, it was a track, flattened out of the bare earth by countless farm vehicles. Probably a muddy predator trap for cars in the wet weather. Luckily that part of Sinaloa had been having a long period of hot, dry days.

“Not far now, the track turns to the right soon.” Jai said.

“Have you been here before ?” Asked Charlie.

“Years ago, when I was a kid. We used to fly kites up here, it was the only high ground for miles.”

Pablo was sure Jai had claimed to be a Peruvian, with mixed parentage. Not that it mattered, everyone he knew told lies about their past. Charlotte brought the vehicle to a stop amongst a few small trees, almost at the top of the hill. Soon everyone was clustered together under cover of the trees, while looking north.

“There it is..... The Fortress.” Said Pablo.

“It wasn’t like that when I was young.” Said Jai. “It was just an ordinary hacienda then, owned by a local politician.”

“That place is huge.” Said Luca.

“It still looks like a hacienda.” Said Olga. “A large one, but unless you know what to look for, it’s still just a family home that takes up several acres. Did you notice the sheds that aren’t really sheds ? A lot of solid looking buildings, right where you’d need to have cover for guards.”

“I see it.” Said Pablo. “It’s no longer a hacienda, it really is a fortress.”

Cartels were famously thorough with their groundwork. Gregor's people had supplied plenty of pictures, some taken from the air. None of the pictures did justice to the strength of the defences. "Arturo has built himself a medieval fucking castle." Said Aron. "He's even got towers at the ends of the outer walls."

"You can't go in there on your own Charlotte." Said Luca.

"It really is the only way." Said Charlie.

Pablo used a small pair of binoculars to look over the two or three hundred yards of ground between the bottom on the hill and The Fortress. The boundary fence began close to track that ran along the base of the hill.

"That's a lot of ground between us and them." He said. "Probably full of cameras, pressure plates and movement detectors."

"Heat sensors too." Said Jai. "Sensitive enough to pick up anything bigger than someone's pet cat."

"Charlotte's right, she does have to go in alone." Said Olga. "We can trigger a few alarms and try to thin out the defences from a distance. We'd need an army to mount a proper attack and even then half our forces would die. We'll give you a noisy diversion, while you slip in another way Charlie."

"It'll be suicide." Said Luca.

"You haven't seen Charlie fight.....I feel sorry for Arturo." Said Olga.

"When do we do this?" Asked Pablo.

"Tonight, it has to be tonight." Said Charlotte. "Before one of their patrol has a chance to spot our vehicles. We'll move at dusk, when there's just enough light to see by, but not enough for Arturo's guards to see clearly."

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