

Ruby 3

Chapter 13 - Allies

“It sometimes happened when she was feeling a bit stressed or had drunk too much. Olga knew she hadn’t drunk that much the night before, yet she had no idea where she was, or the name of the man lying next to her.”

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It wasn’t an impressive structure at all. Kallina probably wouldn’t have visited the prison again, at least maybe not until taking Max something around Christmas. No special prison, the Botswanans had locked Max away forever in their equivalent of a Supermax. No real high tech security, apart from a few cameras along the perimeter fence. There wasn’t much need for modern high tech methods, if you were willing to throw someone into a hole in the ground and forget about them. Escape relies on exploiting weaknesses in the system and there were none. Escape requires hope and there was no hope.

“Even I treated him better than this.” Kallina muttered.

The prison was a few miles north of Mahalapye, half a mile down a side road off the A1. A flat, dry and often dusty area. A few thorn bushes dotted the area, but mostly all she could see for miles, apart from the prison, was dry sandy soil. Darkness hid Kallina, as she stood holding Constanze in her arms. Her mind was troubled after hearing that Charlotte had brought the cellar in the Yemen back into use.

“Too many memories Constanze.....Too many memories.”

She’d given her word to Max that if it came to it, a choice between a hole in the ground or death, she’d give him a quick death. She hadn’t been involved with his arrest in London and British Intelligence hadn’t asked her or Ruby for permission to send Max to somewhere unpleasant, forever. Kallina stroked her ancient feline friend.

“Rendition they call it now.....Still the same as sending a problem to the colonies.”

Botswana had been a late bloomer when it came to independence. Everyone still spoke English and they hadn’t ceased to be part of the empire until the sixties. A poor nation with a need for hard currency and still willing to help out the old mother country. How much were they being paid to keep Max well away from the rest of the world ? Kallina suspected it wasn’t a huge sum.

“Death or a hole in the ground Constanze.....No one considered something in between.”

Five floors to the prison, three of them underground. The deeper you went the hotter and the more bed bugs and other infestations. Max of course was in the deepest part of the prison, locked up behind steel bars and a locked door that hadn’t been opened in years. A tray of food was pushed through a slit in the bars once a day, twice on a good day. Kallina moved herself to his cell, sitting on the edge of his bed as he slept. She rubbed her chin on her cat’s head, causing her to purr.

“Wake him gently.”

Never completely dark in his cell, a single low wattage bulb lit the corridor beyond the bars. Kallina watched, as her cat sat on Max’s chest, while pushing her nose into his face. A strange cat rubbing her wet nose against his face should have caused more reaction, and there was Constanze’s loud purr. Max was calm, almost nonchalant. He sat up and began to stroke her cat, as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Hello Kallina, is it Christmas already?"

"You were awake."

"Day and night are interchangeable down here." Said Max. "I sleep when I feel tired. Last time you left some chocolate and didn't say a word to me. And a visit from dear sweet Constanze, I am honoured."

"I trust you not to hurt her now."

"If I can be trusted, why am I here?" He asked.

Why indeed and why had she come? She knew the reason, it was just that it seemed such a bad idea once she was in his bed bug infested cell. She handed him a carrier bag, containing a few treats and two tins of bug spray.

"You killed a lot of people last time I set you free Max, one of them an ex-policeman."

"He deserved it, they all deserved it. All enemies of my country, all bad people. They used to give me medals for killing such people. Now I get locked up alone until I die."

Max was so like her in his thoughts, that she'd often worried about catching a kind of thought contagion from him. Max Krause wasn't an evil man, he'd just been born into the wrong period of time. He'd have made a perfect knight on horseback, charging into battle.

"You're a man who thinks in black and white Max, born into an age where everything is a shade of grey. Not a problem if you'd decided to become a florist, or maybe a clock repairer."

He was actually laughing at her. Kallina opened two cans of the beer she'd bought in Nairobi, handing one to him.

"I was thinking that maybe, there might be an alternative to this dreadful place." She said.

"You won't let me go free Kallina, we both know that. You're talking about another prison, probably with you as my jailer. Kill me or set me free..... You did once give me your word to end my life, if it came to it."

To her shame she'd sometimes forgotten giving her word about various things, her memory tended to be erratic. Fine some days, usually perfect for memories from about two hundred years before. It was current events which seemed to slip through her mind like tea through a strainer.

"I remember my promise to you Max, but I also promised Ruby not to release you. There is your old prison in the Yemen. I think you're getting a bit too old to drop into the hole in the ground again."

"Not that place again..... Just kill me and have done with it."

"Charlotte has reused your old jail." She said. "There are a couple there now, not the sort to survive for very long. The first snake that comes by is likely to be the end of them."

"There are some nasty snakes in that region."

"There are and a few other dangerous creatures. I was thinking about moving you in with them, in the hope that you might keep them alive. Lionel and Monique Ostby they're called, a husband and wife. What do you think?"

"I'm not a baby sitter."

"Yes, but you do enjoy having a mission. I'd say your motto should be 'a cause, any cause,' as you go over the top to almost certain death."

"Very amusing Kallina, would you like my analysis of your motivation?"

"Not particularly....I can see you keeping the Ostbys alive though and they'll be company for you. What do you think of the idea though? Charlotte is putting in a new portaloo."

Constanze was a good judge of character, even if she did like her ears being rubbed by just about anyone. The way she relaxed with Max, made her feel sure he'd be helped by the Ostby's, as much as they'd be helped by him.

"I'll want a radio of some kind again."

"No problem."

"And decent lighting, perhaps a small generator."

"No happening..... In your dreams as Sophie likes to say."

"Alright, it has to be better than here..... When does this happen ?"

"Now."

"Now ?!"

"Sorry Max, does room service still have your best suit ?"

"Fine.....You just caught me on the hop."

"We'll go now and I'll leave you to introduce yourself to the Ostbys."

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"Of course George knew you'd killed his night guard." Said Sarah. "There was a backup recording of the CCTV. Something else you missed."

Ruby knew she should have whispered to Sarah, telling her not to keep needling their new ally. It was enjoyable though, watching Ishel squirm while trying not to show it.

"I had assumed there'd be a backup somewhere." Said Ishel.

"Easy to say..... Now." Said Sarah.

Sarah could be beyond simple annoying, Ruby still remembered the night of at least a dozen anxiety induced phone calls, all about nothing of note. There was something addictive about watching and listening to her snipe at Ishel. Even Anna had been grinning at Sarah. All Ishel had to do was ignore Sarah's barbed comments. Every time it looked as though Ishel had to respond.

"I can assure you Sarah. I would never lie over something so inconsequential."

Ishel had a way of looking at Sarah now. The look strangers reserve for a family's much loved pet cat, when they've reason to believe it might stick its claws into their hand. Sarah had a sharp tongue and verbal claws, but Ishel knew she also had a gun in her shoulder bag. It created an interesting situation, but Ruby decided to cool things down a little.

"We could push on tonight." She said. "Then we'll all be tired when we get to Limuru Town. Just for one night, I think we should stop and sleep in the vehicles."

"We still have the cooking stuff in the four wheel drive." Said Sophie.

"And plenty of food." Added Doc. "Mostly tinned, but there's a lot of it."

"I like the idea." Said Ishel. "My people have food too and it would give us a chance to get to know one another."

It wasn't the response Ruby had expected. In her mind she'd wanted to keep a little distance from the rogues, just in case it came to a war between them. Getting to know them, perhaps even liking them.....It went against her instincts, but she was willing to see how it played out.

"Sounds good, we'll all share what we have." Said Ruby. "And I'm sure Doc will have brought a few cans of beer."

"And something stronger..... Just for medicinal purposes." Said Doc.

Sophie was giving her a look that could mean 'Are you sure ?' Or 'This sounds crazy.' Ruby wished that Kallina and Olga were there to add their usual cynicism to what looked like becoming a group barbecue.

"You choose where we stop Doc." She said. "Somewhere nice....Near a lake."

"That sounds perfect." Said Ishel.

It was becoming weird and a little worrying, even Sarah was smiling at Ishel. Still..... When it came right down to it, a barbecue was better than war.

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It sometimes happened when she was feeling a bit stressed or had drunk too much. Olga knew she hadn't drunk that much the night before, yet she had no idea where she was, or the name of the man lying next to her. At least he was good looking, with a muscular body. No worries about scraping the bottom of the barrel to find a little casual sex, not yet anyway.

"Where the hell am I?" She muttered.

Finding her clothes took priority over everything else; she was naked under the bedsheet. Her panties were on the floor next to the bed, her blouse and trousers twisted up among the duvet. Judging from the evidence, they'd been in a hurry to get into bed. No good looking the room over to discover where she was, all big chains were identical throughout the world. Even a look through the curtains just showed her a skyline that could have been anywhere from Shanghai to Melbourne.

"You idiot Olga..... The hotel stationery is right there." She muttered.

Ten minutes, fifteen tops and she'd remember everything anyway, she had the other times. A doctor had given her a lot of tests, before telling her it was probably caused by stress.

"Are you in a stressful occupation?" He'd asked her.

Yeah right, as if she could have told him the truth. He'd been a legit expert, one of the top guys in his field, not one of her student doctors being paid by the hour. Olga had once read that one of the Kray Brothers had suffered really badly from irritable bowel syndrome. That kind of lifestyle did things like that to you. The occasional iffy memory first thing, was far better than dodgy guts. Her memories returned with dreadful clarity, as soon as she saw the hotel's headed stationery.

"Oh, crap.....I'm in Milan to pay for the cartel guys." She muttered.

Sleeping beauty in the bed was still a mystery, though she knew his name would pop into her head at any moment. She already remembered a lot about the sex, which had obviously been more memorable than the man's name.

"Troy....I knew it would come to me. Troy the guy from the airport lounge."

Her only golden rule was not screwing her own men, it just didn't seem right. Troy had been pretty, polite and he smelled nice. He used some sort of sandalwood body lotion and she'd wanted to lick it off his bare skin. In fact, she remembered trying to do that the previous night. At least she wasn't late for anything, the clock next to the bed was showing nine twenty. She pushed at Troy's shoulder until his eyes opened.

"Sorry Troy, it was great, the Earth really did move. You need to shower and leave though, I've got a busy day ahead of me."

It seemed a bit harsh. As she dialled room service to have breakfast sent up, she looked at him.

"Fancy breakfast before you go?"

"Better not, I was due at work half an hour ago."

Memories came back as she watched him get out of bed and dig his clothing out of the crumpled bedding. He'd had amazing lower back strength, quite exceptional. If she wasn't leaving Milan on Gregor's private plan that night.....But she doubted if the second time would be as good as the first, it seldom was. Once Troy had gone, she called Aron, who was in a room just across the hall.

"We need to talk about this evening." She told him. "Get Igor and we'll talk over lunch in the hotel restaurant."

Aron was fine, though the doctor was right, it looked like the limp was permanent. Igor had recovered enough to come too, as there was unlikely to be any rough stuff. They both had pronounced limps, but in the opposite leg. Watching them walk across a bar was impressive. They

looked like really tough characters, hard cases as Spider would have put it. Her phone rang, Igor seeing if she needed a hand with the money.

"I'll be fine..... Let Aron do the carrying for a while, that was a nasty injury."

Igor was already worrying about the blood Doc had acquired for his transfusion. To Olga that indicated that her right hand man was well on the way to being healed. She went to the closet and pulled out one of the Ostby's fancy cabin trunks on wheels. Golden rule number two, always count the money several time before you hand it over.

"This damn thing is Tiffany." She muttered.

Who used Tiffany luggage to carry their illicit cash mountain ? Obviously people like Lionel and Monique. Only a small part of the cash was left in the trunk, enough to pay the cartel and leave a little left over. To Olga that was best part, it was amount Ruby had agreed to her keeping, as a kind of consultancy fee. She needed it too, it had been an expensive few weeks.

"At least Gregor should relax now."

Gregor Ross was an old friend who'd worked his way up in the cartel. Not one of the really huge bosses, but big enough to have his own private jet. He'd sent it to pick her up from Paris, her and the money. Bank transfers could always be traced if someone wanted the information badly enough. The cartel had gone back to using bags full of cash for day to day business. Olga counted the stacks of large value dollar bills, before riffling each to make sure every note was the right value.

"I could buy half a dozen good guys and train them up for this." She mumbled.

It wasn't just insurance money being demanded, in case Pablo and his team were killed or seriously injured. Gregor had asked her for the cash, explaining why he thought the amount being asked for was fair and reasonable.

"I've heard some rumours about what you have my people doing Olga. As the cartel, there are things we will do and things we won't. Call it protecting the brand if you like. That whole situation in Paris could have tainted our brand. Then there's the wages we're still paying, plus the usual compensation that might become payable to their loved ones in the event of their death. Plus of course you're paying for all their years of being trained with the latest weapons....."

He'd gone on for quite a while. In the end it was easier to agree to paying the absurdly huge amount, than hearing him drone on for another hour. In theory she just had to give Gregor his cash, keep her own cut, before borrowing his jet to get back to Paris. Of course dealing with the cartel was never that straightforward.

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"I didn't think we'd be able to see the gateway from here." Said Tlal

"The glowing column of light is just a marker; the gateway is beyond it, down a road that no longer exists." Said Fabio.

"Can the humans see it ?"

"No, though Anna claims to feel something in that direction."

Fabio had been feeling a bit left out of things. When the rogue female sniper had befriended Nari, he hadn't expected to be part of their clique. After all, he wasn't a sniper or even that keen on guns. Tlal's real name was fairly unpronounceable, so she'd chosen to be known by a very shortened version of it. Just the first four characters.

"What does she feel ?" She asked.

"Maybe nothing, I suspect some form of autosuggestion." Said Nari. "Everyone was looking at a certain place, so Anna felt it too. Like mass hysteria, but with just one person."

Fabio chuckled, but Tlal missed the point. He knew there was only a tiny amount of human in her DNA. Even so, he had expected her to understand the concepts of feelings and hunches.

“Oh, is Anna prone to hysteria ?” Asked Tlal.

If only Nari had picked up on that one. She just looked at him and shrugged. Fabio liked Tlal, even if she was a rogue Das Geheimnis. Not ‘like’ in a boy meets girl, gets married and brings up two point four DNA divergent creatures kind of way. Her face was reasonably pretty, especially since Nari had taught her how to smile properly. Most of her body looked pleasantly female, her legs seemed to go on forever. It was just that the parts under her clothes where no human had parts, and the shape of her head. It all shrieked alien. Actually it didn’t just shriek, it got up on the roof and yelled ‘Alien’ through a megaphone. Deep down somewhere though, he definitely liked her.

“No, we’re not saying Anna is unstable or anything.” He said.

“I don’t know..... There was that moment with Sarah.” Said Nari.

Nari had a weird sense of humour, she was grinning at him like a Cheshire cat.

“You’re not helping Nari.” He said.

“What happened with Sarah ?” Asked Tlal. “Is she unstable and violent ?”

She had him, hook line and sinker. There was just something about the expression on her face, or he might have read something from her without intending to.

“You..... You’re playing me.” He yelled. “Both of you..... Winding me up.”

“Forgive me Fabio, it was irresistible.” Said Tlal.

“I don’t need to be forgiven, that was fun.” Said Nari.

“That time I was pretending, though I still have trouble with some of the things you say Fabio. We have feelings, but they can always be clearly defined. Anything defined can be talked about rationally. Often your feelings are so nebulous.....Not that I wish to be insulting.”

She put a hand on his arm that was more claw than hand. Had Nari taught her about physical contact between friends, or had it been natural to her ? Whatever the reason, Fabio didn’t mind her doing it. He liked it enough to touch her hand with his.

“Easy you two..... Get a room.” Said Nari.

“Still not helping.” He said.

She’d probably feel any deep probing and take it as an intrusion of her privacy. Fabio let his mind pick up what it could without digging in deep. There was warmth within Tlal, friendly feelings towards him, with a hint of something more.

“I’ll define one of my feelings Tlal.” He said. “I feel that I’d like us to be friends, all of us. All the thirteen and a bit should be genuine friends and long term allies with the rogues.”

“What is a bit ?”

It was Nari’s turn to look a bit embarrassed.

“He means my daughter Seong, who I left in London.”

“That must have been difficult.” Said Tlal.

She touched Nari’s hand, as if she was learning how to behave. The warmth coming from her felt genuine.

“I too hope we can be friends and allies forever.” Said Tlal.

“Get to bed, we’ve a long day ahead of us tomorrow.” Yelled Spider.

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They refused to even entertain the idea of course. A few days after the MOD tech people had left, Foxy’s own people had found three advanced listening devices, one of them in the floor behind his

desk. Not that the MOD would even dignify the question with an answer. But as Lily had heard Foxy tell the minister on the internal secure phone.

“Seems a bit much either way. Either they planted these devices, or they’re unforgivably incompetent. If the devices were already there, they should have found them.”

The minister had muttered about the MOD refusing to entertain the idea that one of their people was a traitor, though an investigation was promised. Not that anyone really thought a traitor acting alone was the problem.

“They were trying it on Lily.” Foxy had told her. “A little eavesdropping in the hope of picking up something juicy. If they were caught, then the devices had been there for years.”

Things were different now, she’d heard the mutterings everywhere from the staff canteen, to the room where the men with guns played card and drank coffee.

“To have an ally who can achieve that.....It gives the department instant respect. A friend of mine has worked for six for years and he asked if there were any vacancies here. We’re flavour of the week again Lily.”

One of the hard looking men with guns had told her. The event in question had been the MOD losing the body of a rogue Das Geheimnis and then Kallina recovering it. It sounded simple, but everyone knew the difficulties involved in getting the body back.

“It kills off any hint of Ruby’s people being a security risk.” Foxy had told her. “Kallina achieved the impossible and left the MOD looking stupid.”

It meant they could openly help Ruby again, though sadly that tended to just mean passing on useful intelligence. Anything more concrete was against policy and as Foxy had pointed out to her.

“Ruby and her wunderkinds seem to do alright on their own.”

Ally was a new word and everyone in the intelligence community was using it. To Lily it seemed an admission that Ruby and the thirteen were powerful, loyal and trusted, yet different. Almost as though Ruby was now a foreigner in her own land, even if a very well thought of foreigner.

“I just wish we could help her more.” Muttered Lily.

Lily was currently stood in front of the box on the wall containing the new weapon. She did have a key, but opening up the box again, for about the third time that morning....She knew the weapon had become a bit of an obsession. It could kill them though, or so the tech people were telling everyone. An energy weapon, though not a laser. An energy weapon attuned to the resonance of the rogue’s cells.

“It’s all SciFi to me Lily.” Foxy had told her. “Based on the new samples and the others. I’m assured the weapon will kill them fairly easily.”

“Others..... There have been other attacks by these things ?” She’d asked him.

Foxy had merely nodded at her without giving her any details. It just made Lily even more determined to help Ruby more, if the opportunity arose.

“No good, I have to see it again.”

Lily leant forward, leaning in towards the box, while keeping as far away as she could. Of course she knew nothing in the box was going to bite her, she just felt more comfortable keeping a respectful distance from it. She opened the box, pushing the door right back.

“For something so deadly, I find it quite beautiful.” Said Foxy.

He was supposed to have been out all morning, she hadn’t even been listening for him. She had a key for the box, there was no need to feel awkward, yet she did. She could even feel her cheeks getting hot.

“Sorry..... It’s just that looking at it makes me feel better.” She said.

"I know the feeling Lily. We were lucky to get it." Said Foxy. "There are very few of them and there are only two downstairs to defend the entire building, yet we have one all to ourselves."

"It does seem crazy."

"Pecking order, everything in the service is about pecking order. Not that I could use the damn thing, even if a horde of rogues were hammering on the door."

"Oh, I could.....I definitely could." She said.

She turned to find Foxy grinning at her.

"Take it out of the cabinet if you want..... Get an idea of the weight." He said.

"Really.....Is that alright?"

"You have a key and you had the same basic instructions as I had in using it. One day you might have to use it for real. Take it out of the box..... Turn it on."

It looked like an assault rifle made out of metal and painted green. There was a curved battery pack, where assault rifles usually had a clip full of bullets. The rogue killer was permanently plugged into a charger, which was plugged into a disappointingly normal thirteen amp socket. Lily grabbed hold of the weapon with both hands and pulled it out of the box.

"Not a bad weight..... As long as you don't have to carry it about all day." She said.

There had been a very small amount of training in handling the device, though she'd never actually fired it. Left hand under the battery box to hold the weight, right hand for the buttons, and of course....The trigger.

"Go on Lily..... Turn it on."

A green button, there was no sound as she pressed it. A small sighting screen came to life though, with a set of crosshairs on it.

"Leave fancy stuff to the professionals." The instructor had told her. "Just put the cross hairs over the bad guy and fire. You have twenty shots before the weapon needs to go back on the charger overnight. Not perfect I know, but these are just the first version."

Aiming well away from Foxy, she swung the sight over his desk, filing cabinets and finally pointed it as a large aspidistra in an earthenware pot.

"Still think you could use it?" Asked Foxy.

"Oh yes, definitely."

Not that she really could then and there, a red dot on the bottom of the sight told her the safety catch was still on, and she had no intention of releasing it.

"No extra training for this weapon, it's still considered a prototype." Said Foxy. "I can get you on the weapons part of a tough guy programme with six, if you'd like?"

"Yes, thank you.....I would really like that."

"It'll also give you a chance to get close to the real enemy." Said Foxy.

Lily turned the weapon off and pushed it back into the charger, before locking the solid looking metal box.

"The real enemy?" She asked.

"Those swine down at Vauxhall." Said Foxy, grinning at her.

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Olga was never asked to surrender any weapons she might be carrying, or the men she usually brought to a meeting. A meeting in Milan was unusual, though she had met cartel people there before. A population of a million and a half, home to the Italian stock exchange and the nation's financial hub. All that made it the place in Italy to be, for the cartel. Gregor had rented two floors in a prestigious city centre office block. Olga noticed that the cool conditioned air blowing on her face

had been given a slight, but noticeable perfume. Olga remembered the ladies toilets were pretty special too.

"These guys know how to live." Muttered Igor.

The waiting area sofas were better than she had at home and the coffee they'd been given was the best she'd ever had, since the last visit to Milan. No sending a flunky, Gregor came out to get her himself. Just her of course, Igor and Aron would be left behind to suffer more five star comforts.

"I'm sorry Olga, a call I had to take." Said Gregor. "I'm sure you understand."

"Of course..... Of course."

The cash was inside a sports bag, though it didn't seem such a huge sum anymore. Probably just about enough to keep Gregor and his people supplied with coffee and perfumed air for a year or so.

"The pilot mentioned a little turbulence on the way here."

"Nothing to complain about Gregor, still far better than travelling economy."

His office had been moved around; she remembered the large desk had been closer to the windows. A corner office of course, with a view to die for. Some said it was a miracle Italy had ever been allowed into the EU. The country had a bit of bad reputation in financial circles. That made it an even better location for the cartel.

"Don't laugh, I had a Feng Shui lady give the place the once over. She said the casual seating area needed to be the focus of the room."

"It does look..... Inviting." She said.

Expensive sofas around an equally expensive looking coffee table. Even the books on the table were straight out of a best seller list. Gregor had done what all wealthy people with crap taste should do. He'd hired a lady to make his office look cool and sophisticated. He picked up the bag as she put it down.

"I won't insult you by counting it." He said.

The bag was taken away by a nameless female PA. Probably the same PA who'd placed drinks and nibbles on the coffee table. Olga had no doubts that somewhere on its journey, someone would count the cash.

"Let me pour you some coffee." Said Gregor. "The biscuits are good too, I'm a little addicted to them."

It was the normal routine; people with families were probably asked how their kids were doing. Men were no doubt asked if their golf handicap had improved. Olga was single, had no intention of bringing a child into the world, and she was totally focused on her business. The small talk soon moved onto why she'd really been flown in from Paris.

"You're doing well lately Olga." Said Gregor. "A little public with the violence perhaps, but having a reputation is half the battle in in your game. Some new friends I heard, or you might be hiring in a little outside talent."

A question or a statement ? It wasn't clear from the way Gregor spoke. Pablo had probably reported in and mentioned a few names.

"Nothing to worry the cartel." She said. "Not new friends, I have worked with some of them for years. Nothing that constitutes a conflict of interest between us."

"But they're very good though, Pablo seemed very impressed by a young lady called Charlotte."

Again a statement that sounded very much like a question. The problem was not knowing what Pablo had told the cartel manager he reported to. Then there was the distinct possibility that Gregor had been asked to do a little fishing by someone higher up the food chain.

“Charlotte is a talented woman, though we’re all really grateful of the help Pablo and his team have given us.”

“She must be damn good Olga..... Pablo talks as though he was taking orders from her.”

“He’s probably exaggerating a little. I did hear he’s a bit smitten with the girl.”

Here it came, the sixty four thousand dollar question. She’d known Gregor for a long time, she knew his body language. Clenching and unclenching his left hand, meant the next question was going to be where he’d been heading all along.

“Who is Ruby Anne Mason ?” He asked.

“Just someone I’ve known since I first moved to Budapest.”

Gregor leant back in his comfy looking leather office chair. Brown leather rather than the usual black, he always had to be different.

“We have a contact in the CIA, someone who will look up information on individuals. Nothing detrimental to the safety of the USA, or anything like that. Just what might be known about someone of interest. The intelligence community equivalent of seeing if someone has unpaid parking tickets. Our contact was taken for interrogation after looking up Ruby Anne Mason and we still can’t contact them. It’s alarming Olga, it’s never happened before. So I’m going to ask you again, who is Ruby Mason ?”

It had to be a question coming from the people at the top; she’d never seen Gregor looking so agitated. The moment called for the truth, or as much of the truth as she was willing to tell him.

“I’ve known Ruby since we both worked for Jurgis.” She said. “I know it was a while ago, but you must remember what happened to Jurgis ?”

“Yes, had his face shot off by a rival gun runner, I seem to remember.”

“Ruby was there that night, sitting right next to him. She ran for the airport still covered in his blood.”

“Dreadful.” Said Gregor.

“She was closer to Jurgis than me, though we both shared his bed occasionally. Ruby was his favourite though, which made me hate her for a while. A hate so strong that I once tried to kill her.”

“Yet you’re still friends ?”

“Don’t ask me to explain that, I don’t understand it and I don’t think Ruby does. Do you remember Tobor the toy maker from Budapest ?”

“Yes, vaguely.....Wasn’t he the best forger in Hungary ?” Asked Gregor

“That’s the one, sadly now dead. He talked to us both and managed to get Ruby and I talking. By some miracle Tobor managed to make us friends again.”

“Knowing Tobor and Jurgis probably explains the CIA interest.”

“My thoughts exactly.” She said.

Oh no, more clenching and unclenching, he wasn’t finished with her yet.

“He didn’t say who, but Pablo mentioned someone promising to help sort out the Arturo problem, once their own matters had been dealt with. Would that have been Charlotte ?” He asked.

“Perhaps, I don’t really know.”

“Don’t play games Olga.....Do you think it was Charlotte ?”

“I can imagine Charlie promising that.... Yes, it sounds like her.”

“This is Charlotte Mason we’re talking about ?”

“Yes.”

“It’s just that there’s also a Sophie Mason, Lau Mason, Eugenie Mason.... Shall I go on ? Was Ruby’s father a travelling salesman ?”

“They are a close family.” She said.

Desperation, he’d made her say something silly out of desperation.

“Close family Olga..... Does that include Lau Mason who gives his nationality as Korean and Fabio Mason with his Italian passport ?”

Frustration made her bang the desk rather than anger. At least it stopped him asking anymore questions for a while.

“What does it matter ?” She asked. “I’m sure you employ people using names they weren’t necessarily born with. As Rupert Bailey, also known as Spider would say.....What has it got to do with the price of tea in China ?”

Gregor was throwing his hands up, palms towards her.

“You’re right Olga and to be honest we don’t give a damn if the entire Mason family are illegal immigrants. I’ve been asked to find out if Charlotte’s offer was genuine. If it is, I can offer her a good deal to carry out the deed. There would need to be an agreed timescale of course.”

Spider also had a saying about being so shocked, you could have knocked him down with a feather. That was how Olga was feeling. The cartel, wanting to hire Charlie to remove the opposition. It was almost surreal.

“But I heard the war with Arturo is almost over.” She said. “Pablo said you’re winning.”

“Morale boosting nonsense for the troops. If I told you how many men we’ve lost in the last two months.....My bosses would probably have me added to the body count. I need you to put Charlotte on my plane and send her here. Not next week, you have forty eight hours to get her here.”

“That might be a problem, she’s in the middle of something.”

“Don’t let it be a problem. I need to talk to her to convince myself she’s capable of removing Arturo. Be honest now Olga, is this Charlotte capable of taking care of Arturo for us.”

“Yes, she is.”

“Good, get her on the plane.”

“I can hardly force her.”

Clenching fists again, he’d probably have arthritic knuckles by the time he was sixty.

“At the moment you’re known as a friendly.” He said. “Almost part of the cartel, an organisation to be trusted. If I move your status to hostile, you won’t be able to operate anywhere in the west. Do you fancy setting up shop in Karachi or Dhaka ?”

“She might not want to come alone.”

“It’s a large plane, she can bring the entire Mason extended family if she likes. Tell her how useful having the cartel as a friend could be to her. Just get her on that plane.”

“I’ll get her here within forty eight hours.”

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