

Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

Chapter 23 – Another Plane

“A lot of nervous billionaires had bought huge yachts, after the banking collapse was followed by a global pandemic. Suddenly the public didn’t think the super wealthy were cool anymore. A yacht was your own small floating nation, populated by people you paid.”

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The huge fleet of Russian fishing trawlers and fish processing ships, are a common sight in the world’s oceans. So many and so common, that they’ve become just another part of the scenery. Rarely bothered about keeping to international waters, they’ve become essential to Russian intelligence gathering. Far from being wary of their visitors from the east, some isolated communities welcome the trawlermen, with their pockets full of money to spend. Visit a few islands in remote locations and the locals will know how to swear fluently in Russian. Even a few romances have bloomed and maybe even a few children have Russian DNA in their mix. All harmless, you’d find it hard to find any scare stories about the Russian fishing fleet in western newspapers. They were ordinary after all.....Part of the scenery.

“Looks like something is happening on the island.” Said Dion, his second in command.

“We’ll report it and remain at this location.” Said Captain Nikolić.

Not that he had any real choice in the matter. His orders were to keep the huge fish processing ship where it was, until it was time for the soldiers and their equipment to leave. Carrying soldiers was rare, but it had happened before. Russian troops joining an ongoing battle, in a NATO country; that had never happened before.

“You’d better tell our passengers the landing might be a bit.....Hot.” Said Nikolić.

Most of the time he was the captain of a fishing processing ship, a floating factory. It kept him busy and he was good at it. A small amount of his time involved his duties as part of the Russian fishing fleet; being a vast intelligence gathering network. Agents were dropped off in obscure locations, radio signals were sent and received. His ship even monitored western surveillance satellites. Nikolić enjoyed that side of his duties, but he knew, deep down. That he’d always be the captain of a floating fish factory first and a spy.....Second, maybe even third or fourth. He knew the saying and it was true. No good being a pig farmer all your life and saying you really want to be an actor, or a writer. There comes a point where like it, or not, you’re stuck as a pig farmer....Or the captain of a fish processing ship.

“I’m just glad I’m not going into.....That.” He muttered to himself.

They had big ear listening devices and cameras that could see in just about any wavelength. Of course, they did, they were a surveillance vessel. There was something going on, probably a battle. Nikolić could see a few flashes, though they were too far offshore for him to hear anything. The ship’s eyes and ears saw it all, every flash of an energy weapon, every thump of a grenade. Strangely, he doubted if the world at large was aware anything was going on. He knew satellites were looking for the big stuff, huge explosions and the massive heat from a thermonuclear detonation. He knew that if anyone set off a nuke anywhere on the globe, a satellite would be over ground zero in less than fifteen minutes. The bangs and flashes on the island, probably weren’t even

being seen or heard, a couple of miles away. Nikolić's second in command returned, with a smile on his face.

"They seem happy about arriving in the middle of a firefight." Said Dion.

"Rather than me." Said Nikolić. "The fight might be over by the time they get there. We're to remain here until ordered to move. It seems the forces coming by air, are not likely to arrive for a day or so."

"Do we know who they are?" Asked Dion.

"When are we ever told anything? The orders were signed off by three top generals, or so I've been told. As for us.....We wait and hope no one notices us. We're a Russian fishing fleet after all, as common as seagulls."

"The trawlers had a good morning, captain. A good catch."

"I'm glad someone is having a good day." Said Nikolić.

The soldiers on his ship weren't huge in numbers, but they had some unusual equipment. Then there were their landing craft and a few all-terrain vehicles. Everything was strapped to the deck and covered in camouflage. The Norwegian army could have a helicopter hovering above them and see nothing. An inspection team though, that would be different. The only time Nikolić could ignore his stay put orders, was if a Norwegian navy vessel seemed to be heading their way. Then he could turn towards the open ocean and leave, at full speed.

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"Not a hint that we're involved in the sting." Said Olga. "There was always a risk we'd be a target for the Russians, but my sources are hearing no murmurings in the undergrowth."

Olga hadn't summoned everyone for a debriefing, they'd all just happened to be in her office at the same time. It could just as easily have happened after breakfast in the dining room. It had to happen though; Olga realised that. Eugenie was there with Lorenzo. They'd come to ask about borrowing a decent car for a trip somewhere. Why Nadia was sitting at a spare desk in her office was, as it often was, a mystery.

"Great, that means we can go home." Said Eugenie.

"I was hoping you both might stay on, for a while at least." Said Olga.

Lorenzo and Eugenie exchanged a look, a kind of half smile. Olga knew it then; they'd be leaving Budapest in the next few days.

"They're young and in love, Olga." Said Nadia. "Let them go back to their lives."

"I know Elio Fulci was a bastard." Said Lorenzo. "The world is better off without him, but I had known him all my life. We just need time to, what I heard Flex call decompress."

"Yes, we're not going forever." Said Eugenie. "We just need a break, a few weeks in the sun somewhere, to decompress."

At one time Olga loved having her mansion to herself. Now she was used to it being more noisy and there always being company over breakfast. Flex taking his family to Belgium had left a hole in the daily routine, which Eugenie was about to make worse. Nothing could be done though. As Nadia had said, they were young and in love.

"Very well, decompress, but remember you're always welcome in Budapest." Said Olga. "Now, as she's the only one of us who understands all of it.....It would be a good idea if Nadia talked us through the results of the sting. Short version, Nadia. No rambling, keep it to bullet points."

Nadia was updating a data sheet with all the abductions and deaths recorded. Olga found the sheet wonderful and a little scary. Yes, they'd wanted to use the Russians to debilitate Gallaan's

operations. It seemed the Russians didn't just want revenge; they were aiming to remove Gallaan completely.

"We used Elio and Maya to convince the Russians we were Gallaan." Said Nadia. "Then we sold them some nice expensive weapons, that didn't really exist. We borrowed some weapons for Elio to see in a container, but he never looked inside any crates. The containers with our borrowed weapons were swapped at sea for others containing cheap garden furniture. It seems that receiving garden furniture upset the Russian military."

"That's putting it mildly." Said Eugenie. "Did you expect them to start abducting Gallaan executives?"

"I expected them to start a very violent pattern of revenge." Said Lorenzo.

"I thought the same, it's their usual modus operandi." Said Nadia. "It seems that Moscow recalled the general who signed off on the non-existent weapons deal. Recall really means being executed and never seen again. He was a popular general, but he had to go, as an example. My guess is that someone senior in the Russian government, wants to settle the score."

"How long do these revenge tactics normally last?" Asked Eugenie.

"They do say the FSB have long memories, a long arm and their vengeance is total." Said Nadia.

"Plus, I can only guess because this situation isn't normal. I don't think they will stop, until everyone above the level of doorman has been abducted, interrogated and killed."

"Crap!" Said Lorenzo. "Though let's remember. Gallaan are the bad guys."

"Their team in Norway are still operational." Said Nadia. "Lots of advanced weaponry, with no one left to report back to. There could be mayhem in Norway."

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Ruby had invited McGill to join her and Todd at the meeting. His marauders would be fighting alongside her and it was fairly certain, some wouldn't survive the battle. That meant McGill deserved to know exactly what was happening. She'd arrived with McGill, while Todd and Alex were obviously trying to be fashionably late.

"The big news for many people, is no more being crammed into the Antonov." Said Ruby. "Another newer version of the Antonov is being loaned to us. Alex made a few calls and it's ours for the duration of the war with the rogues."

"Wow, some space at last." Said McGill.

"By the time the Russian troops join us, there won't be that much spare space." Said Ruby. "It'll help though, making everything feel less cramped. It might even help with the smell too, the Antonov pong as Todd's guys are calling it."

"Oh yes, like someone pickled a pile of old socks." Said McGill.

"I thought it might be one of Kallina's curses." Added Ruby.

It was the first time she'd had a silly conversation with McGill and it was nice. Todd arrived while they were still laughing, with Alex just behind him. Did Todd look slightly jealous to see her sharing a joke with another man? Maybe, there was a definite sign of it on his face.

"Thank you for finding us a second aircraft." McGill said to Alex.

"I've got two Yakovlev Yak-130s escorting us to the border." Said Alex. "I'd use them all the way to Norway, but I think NATO airspace controllers might be irritated by it."

"Whereas....Two air cargo planes in the sky, are so common, no one will think twice about them." Said Todd.

Alex had obviously invited Viktoria. Once she was there, everyone found a chair in the meeting room. No formal agenda, it was just a catch-up meeting. The sort of group chat, that gets everyone on the same page.

"I'll start.....By saying the amphibious assault troops are waiting, on station." Said Alex. "The fish processing ship they're on, is a few miles offshore. Once we give them the word, they'll begin an assault on the south of the island."

"Nice to know.....Have they seen any signs of activity?" Asked Ruby.

"There have been reports of fighting on the island." Said Viktoria. "The ship's surveillance equipment has been picking up the noise and energy flares of a battle, probably a large one. Obviously, it's the Gallaan fighters attacking the rogues."

"That's a nuisance." Said Todd. "We might get there and find none of Ishel's rogues left alive. I was quite looking forward to seeing if the new energy weapons work on them."

To Ruby the answer was obvious, though no one else was saying it.

"If we arrive to find Gallaan in control, they become the enemy." Said Ruby.

"Is that officially your policy?" Asked Alex.

"Yes, would the Russian military have a problem with that?" She asked.

"No, quite the contrary." Said Alex.

"Gallaan Industries are no longer considered to be friends of the people of Russia." Added Viktoria. Something had happened, probably Olga and Eugenie's planned sting. Ruby couldn't be certain of course, though she was happy the Russians were no longer on team Gallaan.

"So, when are we leaving Kaluga?" Asked Todd.

"The second Antonov and the two light combat aircraft will be here just after sunset." Said Alex. "I would suggest that rather than a final night in Moscow, that we transfer some of the heavy equipment to the second Antonov. That way, we can be wheels up after breakfast."

"Damn....Right when I wanted six more Matryoshka dolls." Said McGill.

"Use my wunderkinds, they're incredibly strong." Said Ruby. "I guarantee we'll be ready to leave after breakfast."

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Anne Lee had fully recovered from Eugenie using her gifts on her. She had recurring dreams about the temporary lobotomy, but her mind was clear again and as sharp as it had ever been. Anne knew that for a fact, she'd been through a huge amount of cognitive testing. Gareth had tried to talk her out of it, but the tests had made her feel so much better. The anxiety dreams had dropped in number too, though they hadn't completely gone away. Always dreams about not finishing a task essential to the company, or not being able to find somewhere she knew well. Partly, the dreams were all about being on the run. Anne was currently relaxing in a deck chair, while dressed in a bikini. A long cool drink had been placed on the table next to her. Life was good, but they were still on the run. She took off her sunglasses and looked at the palm tree covered island about half a mile away.

"Very pretty." She said. "Does this group of islands have a name?"

"The Cocos Islands." Said Gareth. "That one is.....West Island I think, but I might be wrong."

"Very nice." She said.

On the way to nowhere, after meeting their private yacht at a marina in the Andaman Islands. A yacht equipped and provisioned for a very long time at sea. A lot of nervous billionaires had bought huge yachts, after the banking collapse was followed by a global pandemic. Suddenly the public didn't think the super wealthy were cool anymore. A yacht was your own small floating nation,

populated by people you paid. You were safe from just about anything, as long as you were careful where you went ashore. They could even run Gallan Industries via satellite links, what was left of it. Their personal wealth was safe though, deposited in many banks, located in many nations.

"Is West Island safe.....To land on, I mean ?" Asked Anne. "I'd quite like to have a walk along the beach I can see."

"I'll ask David." Said Gareth.

David was the captain of their floating nation of them and about twenty, or so staff. Anne would never admit that David was in charge while they were at sea, but both Gareth and her relied on his charts, experience and expertise. Gareth returned after consulting David.

"There's an old jetty at the north end of the island." Said Gareth. "We should be alright landing there, as long as we only stay for a couple of hours."

"Perfect, long enough to have lunch on solid ground." She said.

The Veronica couldn't tie up at out of the way jetties, it was a decent sized marina, or use a boat to get ashore. The name Veronica had been another decision taken after pizza and quite a few drinks. They'd both decided on using a random female first name. As if it was a divine finger pointing from above, there had been a rerun of a Veronica Mars episode playing on cable. From that moment on, their super yacht was known as The Veronica.

"How choppy is the water today ?" She asked David.

"Flat.....Not one ripple."

Using one of the boats was always something Anne dreaded. Fine if the ocean was flat, but a little bit of chop and she felt queasy. She was fine on the Veronica, it only seemed effected by bad storms. Small boats though.....Gareth said everything worth having in life, came with one problem or another.

"They're bringing lunch to us, in about half an hour." Said Gareth.

The old jetty lived up to its name, with lots of rotten wood and a slight lean over to one side. Still, it was far better than clambering out of a boat on a beach. They'd set up chairs and a table, complete with a large parasol. While she waited, Anne sat on a fallen palm tree. Gareth joined her and they watched the people get busy, the staff whose one task was keeping their life comfortable and happy.

"Have Norway checked in today ?" She asked.

"Yes, and it seems Nick Teems was missing, rather than dead." Said Gareth. "He's wounded, but still leading our forces. Lots of casualties and the weapons aren't working as well as we'd hoped. But.....I'm sure we'll win in the end."

"I never doubted we would." She said.

The table was up and ready, someone had even brought them a jug of something cool and refreshing. Anne sipped at her drink and watched the waves, as they seemed to gently caress the beach.

"Are the abductions still happening ?" She asked.

"Yes.....Spreading too." Said Gareth. "The Russians of course, they seem convinced we've been making fools of them, for years. They've even taken a few senior people from our American operation in Delaware. Four abductions from our office in Wilmington. A brand-new development, with supposedly, top of the line security."

"That must be close to thirty abductions by now." She said.

"Thirty two, as of this morning at three am, New York time."

They were both certain of winning the battle in Norway. As for Gallaan Industries.....That was dead, there was no use in denying it. No major corporation can lose that many key board members and survive. Payroll was still being paid, yet rumours were beginning to spread. Staff were walking out of offices around the world, staff that mattered. Insolvency and disintegration would follow, though their corporation might limp on for a while yet.

"I'll soon get bored with our beachcomber life." She said.

"Yes, of course.....We'll start again. New companies, new names, we can afford it. A new product range needs thinking about, armaments aren't the high profit items they once were. The clever money is moving into private medicine, or so my I'm told."

Lunch arrived and Anne knew it would be delicious, it always was. That was the trouble with being a lotus-eater. The life was wonderful, but ultimately boring and uneventful. Anne had been thinking hard about what to do next.

"No, we stay with weapons." She said. "Bioweapons next, specifically biotoxins. Wipe out a nation's crops and they starve. Bakersfield have been experimenting with quick growing fungus.....I'll show you the reports later. Control a nation's food and you control its people."

"It sounds perfect.....Just our kind of thing." Said Gareth.

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The new Antonov arrived just after they'd all finished dinner in the mess hall, the dining room as Ruby insisted on calling it. Everyone had a chance to pour out and look at the gleaming metal and hear the relatively quiet engines. Spider had likened the engines of their old Antonov, to having tractor engines strapped to the wings. By some weird twist of fate, Sophie and Cal were the first people to see the interior of their second plane. Either they were somewhere they shouldn't have been, or everyone else had missed the opportunity. Sophie had asked and a bored looking engineer had lowered the loading ramp.

"Oh, do you smell that ?" Asked Sophie. "Take in a huge nose full of that air."

Cal made a theatrical thing of it, screwing up her face, before breathing in.

"I can't smell anything." Said Cal.

"Exactly." Said Sophie. "No sweaty feet, no odour of over worn boxer shorts."

It would all change of course, once half of them were on their second plane. Their kit would make the cargo hold look untidy, not to mention the small army of Russian dolls. Sophie had claimed to be immune to the Russian doll addiction, until she'd bought about four of them. She'd defended her purchase by saying they'd make good presents for the people back home. If any of them returned in one piece of course. People could grab hold of something solid, when the pilot said he was about to floor the pedal. Russian dolls would just obey the laws of momentum.

"Oh, I just had a terrible thought." Said Sophie. "This plane might have a sensible pilot, who does everything by the rule book."

"You obviously don't know many Russian pilots." Said Ruby.

Sophie had felt Ruby's presence, as she'd come up the ramp. It was nice to see her, mainly to get as much information as possible out of her. It always seemed that when a major battle was close, Ruby began to stop being open about what was happening.

"It is nice....Clean." Said Cal. "I've already decided where to drop my memory foam on the floor."

"Caleb will love it. The old plane is starting to set off his dust mite allergy." Added Sophie.

"I hate to ruin your plans, but we're all still be in the old Antonov." Said Ruby. "McGill and his marauders will be in here, along with the new Russian soldiers. It makes sense, all our kit is on our Antonov home. Plus.....Well, it's home, in a way."

"I get that.... Though this all looks so nice." Said Sophie.

"I bet everything works on this plane." Added Cal.

"We need to be wheels up after breakfast." Said Ruby. "Moving our vehicles out of where they've been wedged since.....It feels like forever. That would take too long. Come on, cheer up. I think of the old Antonov as our home in the air."

"Fine.....Where are we stopping next ?" Asked Sophie.

"Yeah, Spider is running a book on it." Said Cal. "All the big money is on us spending a few days in Stockholm next. I hope that's right.....Charlie says I'll like Stockholm."

"Oh, you guys and your weird ideas." Said Ruby. "There is nowhere next, no more training, no more waiting for people and supplies. Our next destination is where we unload and say goodbye to our planes, at least for a while. We're landing at Tromsø, their international airport. Then it's a five- or six-hour drive to the island. Foxy's contacts in Norway, are making sure we're not stopped on the way, by overzealous cops."

Sophie knew it was all about going to war. All the stops, all the crates arriving, all the people arriving. It was just that a routine had set in. And she had a large bet with Spider, that it's be Stockholm next.

"So.....This is it, next stop is our battlefield." Said Sophie.

"Yep, time to clean and check over that rocket launcher." Said Ruby.

"Fuck.....We're really going to do it." Muttered Cal.

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So many new members in the family, yet Mara was alone. It was a golden rule, insisted on at every training session; never go anywhere alone. The newbies got the idea in their heads in the first few days of joining Villand's family. She was his second in command, the new leader in waiting. There was no excuse for being on her own and in potential danger, other than a few twists and turns of events. She should have stopped on the outskirts of Rouen and called for help. They'd have vanished then though, the Russians she'd been following since leaving Paris. A light blue van and a black SUV, travelling together. It was them, as good for identifying them as a printed calling card. It was the only chance they'd ever had, to finding out what was happening to those who'd been abducted. Mara looked at her cell phone, trying to will it to connect her to the service.

"Damn thing." She said.

Her iPhone had been playing up, she'd had to use her backup burner phone a few times. Only the battery in her backup phone was flat and her iPhone had decided to pick that day of all days, to die on her. Villand hated technology and she was beginning to see why. Mara looked through the windscreen of her car and noticed a few raindrops. Rain was good, it turned all cars in a rear-view mirror into nothing but identical sets of dipped headlights. Especially on a dark night and it was a very dark night. It was a miracle they hadn't spotted her already, though she was certain they hadn't.

"So guys.....Looks to me as though you're agitated and in a hurry." She muttered.

The Russians had left a blood bath in an office in Saint-Denis. She'd left others in the family to work out exactly what had happened. Mara had only been there for a short time, but it looked like Gallaan had been expecting trouble. Several men with guns, quite a few of them dead or in the process of dying. One of the dead men looked different to the others and his gun was the kind used by Russian operative working abroad. Everything about the man shouted dead Russian agent. An abduction that had gone badly wrong, had been Mara's assumption.

"Rain yes, but not a fucking monsoon." She yelled.

Another twist of fate, she'd seen the van and SUV at a fast-food takeaway about five miles along the A1. It seemed even assassins who'd left a man behind, still needed to eat. It had to be them, it had to be. It was her one chance to follow them and anyway.....She could phone the family with details of where she was going. Damned iPhone, Mara was beginning to hate technology as much as Villand did. The rain pelted down, she had to switch the wipers to that annoying setting, where the noise of them swishing across the screen, was irritating.

"I have to admit it guys, I had never thought you were based in Rouen....Never in a million years." Rouen the capital of the region of Normandy. A port on the river Seine since well before the Romans had arrived. Not that far from the centre of Paris, but a longer drive than she thought the Russians would risk. Keep going back and forth and eventually, a bored cop in a traffic car might decide to call your plate in. Or a bored guy monitoring traffic movements on loads of CCTV screens. Mara often wondered how many headline grabbing crimes, had been solved because a bored guy called in a plate number.

"Bonsecours, that makes sense." She muttered. "Lots of secluded houses around there. Still.....A hell of a long drive with abducted executives in the back."

Almost the last house on the left on Rue De La Plaine. A road full of large houses, all of them separated from each other by wide gardens with rows of trees. If Mara had needed to choose a place as a temporary prison, she might have chosen that house, in that location. There was a driveway, with the van parking close to the house. The SUV kept at the other end of the drive, the best spot for a quick exit. Mara drove past and onto a narrow dirt road that went into a wood. Luck was finally with her. There was a place to park among the trees, with a footpath leading back towards the house. She picked her phone up and hit it a few times.

"Crap.....That used to work when mum hit the TV."

Her phone didn't seem to like being beaten; it didn't even try to find reception. A last try with her backup, which was still dead until the battery was charged. It was time to get herself prepared for something that would have driven Villand crazy. She was going back to that house, to watch for a while. Good old-fashioned surveillance, in the hope of seeing something important. Mara had a gun, Villand had insisted she carried one. There was also another gun in the glove compartment. Old and only for emergencies, but she shoved it into a jacket pocket. Nice to have a second gun, though she'd have preferred an umbrella. The rain was full on monsoon, with no sign of it letting up. There was also a flashlight in the glove box. She tested it and it lit up the interior of the car. Great, though it was only for emergencies. Up to her neck in a water-logged drainage ditch and she'd use it. Otherwise, it would simply sit in her pocket.

"Come on girl, get this done." She mumbled at herself.

Out of the car, though she stood there for a good five minutes, letting her eyes become accustomed to the dark. There's a glow in the clouds above any major city, especially on a rainy night. Not much light, but enough for her to see the footpath. By the time she reached the end of the path, she'd seen the house. Lights next to the door, illuminated the light blue van. Mara found a tree stump and settled her backside on it, as comfortably as she could.

"Now I watch and get wet." She muttered. "Before more watching and getting even wetter."

There was cover from a few trees, which meant she'd still be pretty well hidden when the sun came up. It had to be daylight eventually, even in Rouen. Her normal faith in such things had been dented by two dead phones and several unexpected twists and turns in events. After an hour the men appeared, carrying something out to the van. Disposal of bodies ? Mara realised her mind had been

skewed towards dark interpretations of just about everything, after discovering an office that had looked like a slaughterhouse.

"They're probably going out for beer, or a takeaway." She muttered.

Impossible to count numbers in the dark, but it looked like all of them had clambered into the back of the van. Mara decided at that moment, to have a quick look around the house. Not inside of course, she had no intention of even trying a door.

"Outside though.....No harm in that."

There was an old fishpond between her and the house. Only a foot or so of grubby water that smelt of rotten greens. No real harm, though Mara would spend the rest of the night in soaking trainers and have wet ends to her jeans. No using her flashlight though, not even once. She made it to the house wall, with no further upsets. Two lights inside, no one had pulled down the kitchen blinds. Nightlights in the kitchen, designed to stop stubbed toes during raids on the fridge in the middle of the night. It looked like no one was home. Then Mara noticed.....The back door was ever so slightly ajar.

"Oh.....Villand would be so angry." She mumbled, quietly.

It was worse than a mere temptation, the open kitchen door felt like a challenge. In and out quickly, there was no harm in that. Of course, if she saw a phone while she was in there, a quick call to Villand's family, was way overdue. For all she knew they might be out looking for her. That made up her mind, she opened the door.

A radio was playing softly in the kitchen, a pop song that was going viral that year. A radio probably left on all day, there was no sign of life. Mara walked through the kitchen and into the lounge area. Huge and well furnished and once again, no sign of anyone being home. No phone though, not even a cell phone left on the coffee table. On her way to the back of the house, there was a slight smell at a door near the stairs. A nasty smell, though not overpowering. It was an odour Mara knew though, the smell of death and corruption. She had to open the door; nothing could have stopped her. It was unlocked and opening it brought a stronger whiff of death.

"Why haven't they buried the dead." She muttered.

Stairs beyond the door, leading to the inevitable cellar being used to dump the bodies of Gallaan board members. There was only one or two things that created that smell of corruption and Mara didn't believe there was a dead tomcat down there. At the bottom of the stairs was a small room. A table was covered in what had to be the property of the dead. Various personal items, mainly for men, but a few expensive bags, the kind of fashion items loved by women. Mara only had eyes for the jumbled-up heap of phones.

"A Samsung I think, one with no password set." She mumbled.

Iphones were great, but once the password had been set, it was a brick for anyone but its owner. She'd had a Samsung once though and people tended not to use the password function. Mara found an old Samsung in the pile, one that was quite happy to show her a list of over a dozen missed calls. There were pages of messages too, but best of all.

"Two thirds of a battery left; you'll do."

She turned the sound right down and dropped the phone into a pocket. Making the call home would come once she was outside the house again. No looking at the huge pile of personal effects, there simply wasn't time. Family policy against it or not, Mara would call the police as soon as she was somewhere safe and private. Through a gap in the wall and she was in the main cellar, or basement. Against one wall, was stacked the cause of the dreadful odour.

"Fuck !" She muttered.

It was a great word, an expletive that handled any occasion, including finding over a dozen bodies. Not enough bodies really, they had to be burying them. Maybe that was where the van was going? There had to be a limit to how many shallow graves could be dug in one night. This was obviously the overflow pile. The bodies grabbed her attention. So much so, that she hadn't noticed the three people sat in chairs. One of them, the woman had twisted her head and Mara had finally noticed them.

Two men and one woman, duct taped to heavy wooden chairs. Duct tape over their mouths too. The only thing they could do was look terrified and move their heads, just a little. All three of them looked badly beaten. It was a production line, of a kind. Bring down the abductees, beat the crap out of them for information. Then came the killing, probably by bludgeoning, judging by the amount of blood around the chairs. Lastly stacking the bodies, before burying them somewhere, out in the local woods. The woman looked at her and she was crying, bloody tears. Mara put her mouth against the woman's ear and whispered.

"Don't worry, I will call the police."

Mara didn't hear the footsteps until he was quite close and he obviously didn't know she was there. He was actually humming a tune as he entered the cellar, the same one the kitchen radio had been playing. Mara had the gun out of her pocket as he arrived, grinning at the three people duct taped to chairs.

Russian probably, though his looks suggested any one of a dozen countries in Eastern Europe. It seemed to take him a few seconds to notice her. He actually smiled at her, before reaching for something under his jacket. Probably a gun, though Mara had already decided to kill him. There was only one proper reaction to what she'd seen in that cellar. She aimed the gun at his face and pulled the trigger.

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