

Ruby 3

Chapter 10 - Complications

“Kallina touched the body, running her hand over the cold flesh, pressing a finger into one of the bullet wounds. They were like her in so many ways, almost part of the same family.”

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Charlotte had always wanted to meet Malou. To her she seemed a hero, a woman who'd once been part of the Paris underworld. Not only had she quit that life on her own terms, she'd amassed enough money to buy a luxury hotel and several other businesses. The hotel stood right on a corner, the Eiffel Tower within easy walking distance. The outside of Malou's hotel shrieked luxury, as Charlotte stepped out of the cab from Paris-Charles De Gaulle airport.

“Ruby said it was nice, but this.....It's not what I expected.” She said.

“You probably expected a one star hotel in a seedy backstreet.” Said Olga. “It was a long time ago, but Kallina told me Luran Bacall was once smuggled out of the back door to avoid the press.”

“As long as there's a minibar and cable TV, I'll be happy.” Said Pablo.

“No getting drunk, we'll be working tonight.....Tell the others.” Said Olga.

The others were Christophe and Jai, who were currently helping the hotel doorman, as he put their bags on a shiny, chrome plated trolley. It was all so luxurious, like the stories Kallina had told her of Moscow, before the revolution.

“No, I'll take those.” Said Pablo, as he grabbed her cases.

Pablo and his colleagues had gone from a little cocky to eager to please in almost an instant. Kallina had shown them pictures on her phone. Pictures of two very dead men with blue lips and bulging eyes.

“They were in your hotel room.” Kallina had said. “Both armed, they killed the young man who was driving me around. Do you know them ?”

Pablo had gone visibly pale, though Charlotte had doubted pictures of dead men usually bothered him.

“They're Arturo's men, I recognise the one on the left.” He'd told them. “There was a war once between our boss and theirs. Supposedly long forgotten and forgiven, but I believe there's still a price on my head.”

To Charlotte it sounded like another complication they could do without. Ruby obviously viewed it differently.

“Looks like you need our protection now.” She'd told him. “Do a good job for us and I'll ask Kallina to help you out with the Arturo problem.”

Charlotte followed the trolley into the hotel lobby, loving the old world charm of polished wood and marble floors. The reception desk was to her right, with a young man and woman smiling at Olga, as she booked everyone in.

“I used to leave Ruby off the hotel register. She was considered to be my personal guest. I could do the same for you, if you want me to ?”

Of course Malou knew her, Ruby had probably described them all to her. Their host was small and thin, with a short bob of grey hair. More grey than Ruby had described, but everyone changes a little in five years. Malou had a walking stick in her left hand, which was probably new. Charlotte moved closer so they wouldn't be overheard.

“They can book me in; I’m told my passport will pass any inspection. How did you know me, did Ruby describe me ?”

“Yes, but there’s something about your eyes, even from a distance. Don’t worry though, few would recognise it for what it means.”

It meant she wasn’t completely human, which had never bothered her before. Now, with so much trouble being caused by the rogues, Charlotte was feeling a little sensitive about her lineage.

“Flecks, Ruby calls them flecks.” She said.

“And they give you pretty eyes Charlie.”

“I’ve been wanting to meet you for so long.” Said Charlotte.

“Olga can make enough fuss for a dozen people.” Said Malou. “Why don’t we let her book everyone in, while I show you the famous view from the roof. It’ll give us a chance to talk. You’ll need to be patient though...I move slower these days, but I get there.”

“I’m sure you do Malou.”

Malou took her past the kitchens, with their wonderful smell of breakfast, mixed with freshly baked bread. The freight elevator looked less impressive than the ones usually used by guests, but it was spotlessly clean.

“Ruby told me once that she liked the shabby chic of my hotel.” Said Malou. “I still can’t make up my mind if that was a compliment or an insult.”

“I think it’s wonderful.”

None of the buttons had numbers. After Malou pressed the top button, the elevator clanked and rattled, before stopping at what Charlotte assumed was the top floor. The lighting wasn’t brilliant in the narrow corridor and the odours were now of coffee and takeaway pizza.

“The staff have accommodation at the top of the hotel.” Said Malou. “Two more lots of stairs and I may need to lean on you a little.”

“That’s alright, I’m stronger than I look.”

“I’m sure you are, I’ve heard about some of your exploits.”

Past the staff accommodation, with rap music coming through one door and jazz from another. Malou did lean on her, and again as they went up the final set of steps to the roof.

“The view Malou.....It feels like I can see every rooftop in Paris.”

“This is where it happened of course, the Henri Gervex incident.” Said Malou. “I’m assuming you’ve heard all the details of that night ?”

“Yes, Ruby told me.”

There were chairs set out for the staff, even a couple of tables. With the early morning breeze and the clouds beginning to clear, it looked like being a perfect Parisienne day.

“The view.....You must see the view of the tower.” Said Malou. “Then we can sit and talk.”

Malou walked towards the left of the staff’s unofficial roof garden.

“There, I hope you’re alright with heights.” Said Malou. “You need to lean out a bit and look to the left.”

Charlotte leant and looked. The view over the chimney stacks was only of the top third of the Eiffel Tower, but it was still amazing.

“I see it.....So clear.” Said Charlotte.

So touristy it felt cheesy, but she had to get her phone out and take a picture of that third of the tower, as it appeared to grow out of the chimneys. As she turned a thought occurred to her. She lifted her phone, finger ready to hit the camera icon.

“May I ?” She asked.

“Yes, of course.”

Malou looked pleased that she'd asked, actually posing a little and placing her stick out of the way, on one of the tables. Charlotte sent the picture to Ruby, with a simple one line text.

‘Arrived in Paris.’

“Thank you, I just sent the picture to Ruby.”

“Ruby loved this hotel.” Said Malou. “With its freshly made beds every day, the clean towels, the mini bar that gets restocked as if by magic. But most of all, she loved coming up to see that view. I hope to see a lot more of you Charlie and I hope you begin to love that view too.”

“I’m sure you will see more of me.” Said Charlotte.

“Sit, sit next to me....I’m afraid I can’t guarantee the chairs are clean.”

Charlotte sat down and moved her chair for the perfect view over the roof tops.

“Firstly an admission Charlie, I have spoken to George and I intend to keep him updated. Ruby used to say I thought of George Polandrous as some kind of messiah. Untrue, though I do greatly respect his opinions.”

Charlotte had to smile. Such a typical Ruby comment, she could almost hear her saying it.

“As do I..... As do I.” Said Charlotte.

“So you’ve no objection to me keeping him....In the loop as they say ?”

“None at all.”

“Good....I have already put out a few discreet enquiries.” Said Malou. “I’ve already learned quite a bit about Lionel and Monique Ostby.”

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After the death of Levan it was now personal for Kallina. She wasn’t good at looking deep into her own motivation; in fact she thought it potentially destructive. Introspection had no end and once the eye turned inward, it could become impossible to stop. Levan had tried to help her and as far as she was concerned it was her duty to avenge him. She’d told Ruby about her plan and been rewarded with a genuine jaw dropping moment. Eyes wide, pupils fully dilated, she had genuinely shocked one of the few people she thought were unshockable.

“You don’t like the idea ?” Kallina had asked.

“Well.....It’s very.....Only you could pull it off.” Said Ruby.

“They are bound to try though. We would, if he was one of ours.”

“Definitely..... Alright, just try not to get hurt.”

Finding the body was easy, Lily had told Trudy which MOD lab was going to carry out the autopsy on the male rogue’s body. One camera in the hallway outside, but no surveillance at all in the cold room. In a way gaining access was far too easy.

“They should at least have motion detectors.” She mumbled.

Kallina touched the body, running her hand over the cold flesh, pressing a finger into one of the bullet wounds. They were like her in so many ways, almost part of the same family. If things had worked out a little differently, if Kurt hadn’t insisted on taking a different path.....

“I mean you no disrespect.” She muttered.

The tracker had nothing to do with technology. A piece of her own skin and flesh were the main ingredients, mixed in with a few herbs and mystically catalysts. One of the herbs came from a bush that had once grown in Ethiopia, but was now extinct. She’d needed to become Baba Yaga for a while to complete the rituals required. The tracker was small and untraceable, wrapped up in pig gut like a sausage. It was her essence, part of her and she’d be able to find it anywhere.

“Gesare de as volle vitale Ouson.” She muttered.

It sounded so strange to use the long dead language of the people of the Karakum. Her vocal chords had to twist about to get the right sounds.

"Forgive me for violating your flesh cousin." She'd told the dead male.

Her finger easily dug deep into one of the dreadful chest wounds. Kallina then pushed the tracker deep inside. It would have no meaning to whoever did the autopsy, they'd probably put it down as something weird but unimportant. The sound of a trolley rattling along the corridor meant quickly wiping away any bodily fluids she might have left on his chest, and leaving.

"I'll keep a watch on you cousin." She muttered.

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Sarah Simmons hated moving every two days. They'd been given memory foam mattresses and everyone seemed to have collected a few personal items. Moving wasn't as simple as picking up a few bags anymore. It had become a bit of an issue for her and it brought back memories of being evicted from a few rented rooms in London. The evictions had usually happened suddenly, forcing her to try and carry everything she owned.

"Do we have to do this every two fucking days?" She asked no one in particular.

"It might keep us alive if anyone is trying to find us." Said Sophie.

Sarah wanted to get angry and yell, but it was Sophie. For some reason she always found it hard to get angry with her, though she could sulk a little.

"I suppose.....Whatever." Said Sarah.

Spider gave her a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Come on.....I'll roll up your mattress while you pack." He said.

It was definitely happening with Spider, the gradual shift from being fuck buddies to having a proper relationship. It was all a bit Tarzan meets Jane, with him carrying her stuff and her cooking him a few meals. It was nature's way of getting the sexes to bond though, and nature refused to be beaten. Anna running into the room was actually a welcome relief from the tedium of collecting up her stuff again.

"They attacked Doc's business.....A truck was set alight." Yelled Anna.

"Sounds like we're not moving after all." Said Sarah.

Heartless maybe, Anna glared at her. Sarah didn't care, she'd long since given up worrying about whether she upset Anna.

"How bad was it?" Asked Sophie. "Did they destroy the building?"

"No, just a truck..... They left a note on his desk, the cleaner found it." Said Anna.

Sophie dropped her bedroll on the floor and stopped shoving clothes into her bag.

"Sarah is right, we won't be moving today." She said. "Ruby will want to have a meeting about it."

Sarah actually helped Spider to unpack his stuff. Yes, they really were moving into some sort of relationship. They'd all had coffee and breakfast, by the time Ruby had everyone get together in the lounge of yet another borrowed house. Surprisingly, it was Doc who began the proceedings.

"The couple who look after my business while I'm out of town had a bit of a shock last night. There isn't room for all the vehicles to go under cover. Two old trucks get left outside and one of them was set ablaze at around midnight."

"Another burned out truck for the collection." Said Fabio.

Sarah couldn't help laughing and several of the others joined in. Ruby only had to hold her hand up for everyone to be silent.

"I will make sure Doc's truck is replaced." She said. "They left a note....Please let Doc finish in silence."

“They unlocked the door, put the note on my desk and locked the doors again.” Said Doc. “The cleaner read it and the couple I employ in Nairobi. The note was safe though, no mention of rogue’s or super powers. It says they don’t want a war. They want to meet to talk, at my office in two days time.”

“What time ?” Asked Fabio.

“Midnight local time.” Said Doc.

“It’s certain to be a trap.” Said Sophie.

“That’s exactly why we have to go.” Said Spider. “We know there aren’t that many of them. This gives us a chance to take the fight to them.”

“Utter nonsense.” Shouted Anna.

Sarah added another grievance to a quickly growing list of grudges. One day she’d get her revenge on Anna Kaloyanova. Not that she was in a hurry, she agreed with the saying that revenge was a dish best served cold. She might have told Anna a few home truths, if Ruby hadn’t quietened things down.

“We’re all friends here.” Said Ruby. “I agree with Spider, we have to turn up for the meeting. Our enemy are short in numbers, probably why they hired their assassins through our friend JC. Where is he by the way ? I haven’t seen him today.”

“He loves us all now.” Said Sophie. “He’s behaving like a stoned flower power hippie. He’s currently following Nari about like an excited puppy. She has him washing down the four wheel drives.”

“Right, I’ll get Kallina to deposit him somewhere in Budapest.” Said Ruby. “We can hardly take him with us to Nairobi. Checking him in to a hotel might be..... Problematic.”

“So we’re all going to Nairobi ?” Asked Anna.

“Yes, we are.” Said Ruby. “I didn’t want to use hotels, but there isn’t time to arrange anything else. It’s probably a trap, though we can’t waste the opportunity to meet them. They are small in number, so the offer of a kind of truce might be on the table.”

“You can’t trust them.” Said Nari, from the doorway.

She had JC with her, who hadn’t shaved since arriving in Kenya. He really did look like a hippie from the seventies.

“We won’t trust them.” Said Ruby. “I think we’d beat them in a fight and they know that. Even if they won, it would cost them more lives than they can afford to lose. Crazy and untrustworthy they may be, but I’m slowly coming over to thinking the whole not wanting a war thing...Just might be genuine.”

“Burning my truck seems a weird way to show we can trust them.” Said Doc.

“Just getting our attention, showing us they need to be taken seriously.” Said Ruby.

Kallina picked that moment to appear out of thin air. Her clothing looked scorched, though no one reacted. She began a whispered conversation with Ruby. Sarah rolled up her bedroll again and began to put things in her bags. Spider just looked at her.

“Come on, you heard the lady.” She said. “We’re going to hotel in Nairobi. A proper bed, room service, hot water in the shower..... Best of all.... A full minibar.”

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Dr Patience Gaynor had been given her name and baptised with it, by very religious parents. Most people she met didn’t seem to realise that Patience was one of the seven heavenly virtues. She corrected anyone who tried to shorten it in some way, insisting on being called Patience. Her faith in a personal God wasn’t as strong as her parents had been, but they’d given her the name, so she was going to insist on people using it properly.

“We need everything on this one.” Said the voice in her earpiece. “Not an autopsy, we can assume the bullets killed it. We really need to know what made it tick while it was alive.”

That was the trouble with working as a scientist with the MOD, too many people wanting answers quickly, rather than accurate results.

“I’m going to seal the lab before I make the first incision.” She said.

Cutting up creatures that weren’t human was rare, though it had happened before. No one knew what unpleasant pathogens might be lurking inside their bodies. Just one super antibiotic resistant form of bacteria had the potential to kill millions. If anything happened to her, the lab and everything in it would be incinerated. Patience went through a very detailed and rather dull description of the creature she was about to dissect.

“Can we cut to the chase on this one Patience ?”

Someone who knew her, though she had no idea who. The earphones in the heavy biohazard suit distorted everyone’s voice.

“No, this one is by the book.” She replied.

She rather admired the size and obvious strength of the dead creature on the table. It would have been nice if one of Foxy’s people hadn’t put several large calibre bullets in his chest, but she had to work with what she was given.

“Male genitalia that looks human, yet the shape of the head and jaws definitely isn’t. Initial hypothesis is that we’re looking at some sort of chimera, a hybrid, almost certainly artificially created.”

One day they’d develop a robot capable of carrying out the high risk dissections. Until then it was left to a small group of professionals like Patience. She done it all before, yet her hand trembled slightly as she made the usual first cut. Actually she normally opened up the head first, but the voice in her ear was asking for a look in the chest. Patience cut the usual large Y incision to open up the chest and abdomen.

“Folding back the skin and subcutaneous fat.” She said. “I recognise almost nothing, though there are internal organs. I’m going to crack open the chest to see the heart, if there is one.”

“The bullets must have hit something to kill him Patience.”

“No heckling from the cheap seats please.”

Her attempts at humour usually fell flat, but that didn’t stop her from making the attempt. They were up there in the viewing area, the men in suits from different parts of the security services. Over the years she’d learned to do it her way, refusing to cut corners. Patience had trouble with the chest cracker.

“Its bones are like steel.” She said. “I’m going to use the bone saw.”

The rotary bone saw was smoking by the time she’d finished, though it had done the job.

“Removing breast bone.” She said for the recording.

Patience had seen it all and done it all, even a full autopsy on something several scared looking MOD guys had called a Das Geheimnis. That had been the body of a child though, a very human looking girl child. Nothing could have prepared her for what was beneath that breastbone.

“Christ ! Are you seeing this ?” She yelled. “I don’t think that’s even.....”

It was impossible, but Patience realised she wasn’t alone. It was one of them, a large female. The creature was dressed in some kind of robe with a hood. It was leaning across the table, pulling the dead body towards her, into her arms. Patience wasn’t immensely brave, she just understood the need to follow protocol.

“Burn the lab.” She said.

“Repeat that Patience.”

“Burn the lab you fools, before she gets the body.”

It became a tug of war, with the large female pulling the body one way, while Patience tried to hang onto it. It was going to cost her life and she'd often thought fire had to be a dreadful way to die.

Protocol was protocol though, the body had to be incinerated if it couldn't be secured.

“Sorry Patience.” Someone said.

As the flames began, Patience knew she was about to give her life for nothing. The female made a frantic grab for the body and vanished, taking the body with her. No way to cancel the burn, she could already feel the heat, a little pain beginning on the back of her hands. Into the inferno arrived another female. A pretty blonde woman, actually smiling at her. It was impossible of course. The fire went away, the heat was no longer there. The pretty blonde was still there, though her dress was smouldering.

“You idiots, you let them get the body.” Yelled the woman.

The pretty blonde wasn't smiling anymore.

“Tell Foxy that Kallina will recover it.....Idiots.”

The woman was gone, in an instant. Patience was just left with the breastbone from the body, clutched in her left hand. It wasn't much, but it was something. She pulled the breastbone to her own chest, almost hugging it. After a while, the watching men must have recovered from shock.

“What do we do now ?” Someone asked.

“Get me out of here.” Shouted Dr Patience Gaynor.

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Olga liked Paris; she liked most large cities around the world. Her height and shock of blonde hair made her stand out in small towns. Parts of Asia could be awkward too; a gang of school children had once followed her about in Japan. They were friendly, but she was attempting to keep a low profile at the time. Paris was perfect, a melting pot, a potpourri of different races and cultures. As in London, she fitted into the Paris crowds with ease. For once, it was her turn to be the cautious one.

“We need at least two or three days to get a feel for their routine.” She said.

“One day, there isn't time to get to know their full routine.” Said Charlotte. “Tomorrow night we'll have a little talk to Mr & Mrs Ostby.”

It was likely the targets had seen pictures of the thirteen. A brunette wig had changed Charlotte, making her look different enough for Pablo to have walked right past her. Add on enough thick makeup to keep Taylor Momsen happy and Charlie wouldn't be recognised by anyone. Olga had changed her own appearance a little, though she had no intention of getting close to Monique and Lionel Ostby.

“Why the rush ?” Asked Pablo.

He was more curious than a hundred cats and didn't seem to realise that not every conversation was meant to be overheard. Eventually the thirteen would probably have to give Pablo and his men a large enough dose of whammy to cause convenient amnesia.

“They'll know JC has been taken by force, half the world must have seen the aftermath on the evening news.” Said Charlotte. “The Ostbys will find someone else to hire assassins from. They need to be interrogated and dealt with as a matter of urgency.”

There was something about the way Charlie said dealt with. Olga doubted if the Ostbys were going to see the sunrise on many more mornings.

“No rough stuff tonight Pablo.” Said Olga. “We're just here to look after Charlotte and get her close to the targets.”

"I understand." Said Pablo. "You can rely on us."

Pablo never lied. If he said he understood he meant it. It hadn't taken any of the cartel men long to understand about the thirteen and their gifts. People whose entire life was violent and stressful, seemed to cope better with the unusual. Or at least it seemed that way to Olga.

"They've arrived." Said Jai.

Malou had given them a lot of information, including the couple's favourite restaurants and the cars they usually arrived in. The rest had been easy, a quick phone call to four restaurants by a fictitious PA to confirm the booking. Quick and a little iffy, there was a slight chance of the targets finding out. Charlie was working to her own tight timetable though and caution only seemed to go so far.

"That's her, Malou described her perfectly." Said Charlotte.

A limousine no less, only the best for Lionel Ostby and his wife. They glanced to either side as they entered the restaurant, like celebrities expecting to be recognised.

"So arrogant, I can pick that up from here." Said Charlie.

Olga moved closer to whisper.

"Lionel is very wealthy and he knows people." She said. "Tomorrow we either have to leave them alone or kill them. There can be no in between."

"I know."

The Hausmann wasn't just a restaurant, it had two busy bars and a popular nightclub that didn't open until midnight. Again, the local knowledge was all thanks to Malou. It was the perfect place to get Charlie close to the targets, without causing suspicion.

"Let's do this." Said Olga.

They walked across the road together, though they would spread out a bit once inside. Olga was first to enter Restaurant Hausmann.

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Ruby often wondered what people had done before modern cellphones. Not people calling the boss or lovers arranging a date. Love will always find a way. It was the clandestine meetings that must have been difficult, the texts to confirm the place and time. She had Kallina to hurtle instantly around the globe if need be, but people with those kinds of gifts were rare. Mercifully rare, a world full of Baba Yagas didn't bare thinking about.

"Telegrams I suppose." She muttered.

"What are you going on about ?" Asked Sophie.

"Before cellphones..... They must have used coded telegrams."

Doc was driving and even he turned to look at her.

"Ruby.....You're getting more random than me." Said Sarah.

"Ignore me, I'm pondering and day dreaming at the same time."

She sometimes did that, drift off to sleep while still thinking about a problem. She'd sometimes even woken up with a solution in her head. Then the problem was working out if it was the right solution. It looked like it was her day to be random.

"Are you still good with a gun Sarah ?" She asked.

"I suppose so, I don't get much opportunity to find out."

"Get Spider to give you one of the guns we took off the Russians." Said Ruby. "I've decided you're coming with me to the meeting."

"Of course, you probably need my language skills."

"Yes, but that's not the main reason." Said Ruby. "I need you there Sarah."

Confused faces all round her and she had no intention of explaining herself. From out of her waking dreams had come a certainty that Sarah had to be with her at the meeting. She'd had such a feeling once before and would have died if Sarah hadn't been there.

"Will I be there?" Asked Sophie.

"Of course you will."

"Can I come?" Asked Doc.

"No, you'll be waiting for us in the Hummer."

The faces told her she'd over shared.

"But I don't own a....." Began Doc.

"I need to sleep, wake me up when we get to wherever I said we'd be staying tonight."

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Charlotte hadn't really known about places like the Hausmann when she was with Kallina. It was difficult to socialise when you're asleep for most of the year. It was Ruby's fault really, taking them to The Moonshine Bar in Vladivostok. It was reputed to be a place Russian sailors went for fun and Charlotte discovered she quite liked the attention of good looking young men. On her terms of course.

"I'd better stay with you." Said Pablo. "Cover and all that."

Her smile could either encourage or discourage, depending on her mood and how good looking the man was. Pablo though? He was obviously keen, she could pick up his thoughts without really trying. He was right though, moving around as a couple would look more natural than wandering about on her own. Olga had gone, leaving the visit to the Hausmann in their capable hands as she'd put it. Olga had other places to be.

"Alright, just don't read more into it though....Understood?"

"Fine, just here to help."

"I love these places." She told him. "The lights, the sounds, the people. I even like the smell of stale tobacco and spilled booze. I never knew such places existed until Ruby decided we all needed a little fun."

"We? How many of you are there?"

"Thirteen.... Actually thirteen and a bit. Nari had a baby girl. Come on, we should mingle."

"We need drinks to mingle properly." Said Pablo.

"Good idea."

Ruby had warned all of them about letting their gift for mind reading wander too far in busy places.

"You'll be overwhelmed by it all." She'd told them. "Use trigger words and be selective. Tune out everyone apart from the target, the person of interest."

Good advice, really good advice. They'd all ignored it of course. Who wouldn't want to know what everyone in the room was thinking about. They all had almost a rite of passage, marked by the room spinning round, headaches, nausea. Poor Trudy told them all she'd vomited, several times.

"What do you drink?" Asked Pablo.

"Surprise me.....Nothing with an umbrella in it."

Charlotte's moment for wishing she'd listened to Ruby's truly excellent advice has arrived in a large supermarket in Turkey. The thoughts of over a hundred shoppers, all sounding like whispers in her mind. It was too tempting, the opportunity to know what so many people were thinking about. To feel their emotions, their fears, their desires. She looked into one mind and became hooked on the raw emotions inside a young teenage boy. Charlotte had opened herself up to them all, like turning on a hundred separate HiFi system to maximum volume at the same time.

"I hope you like this."

The drink was blue and tasted as though it was made of rubbing alcohol. Not that Charlotte cared about the taste. Anything alcoholic took the edge off, which seemed the whole point of drinking the foul stuff.

"Perfect." She said.

"Erm..... Shouldn't we be looking for Monique and her husband?"

"I've known where they are since we came through the door. To your left.....Don't suddenly stare....At the bar, drinking something brown in small glasses."

Poor Pablo, she was getting his 'you're better at this than I thought,' expression.

"Sorry." He said.

"No problem, Ruby taught us that being underestimated is just another weapon. I need to get close to them to concentrate on Monique. I also need a few trigger words to push her thoughts in the right direction."

"Alright.....If you think it's essential."

"It is, picking up random thoughts is pointless and can be dangerous. One day I'll tell you about my trial by fire in a supermarket in Turkey. I ended up clinging to the shelving and screaming at everyone to shut up. The nausea was the worst part, it lasted for three days."

"Jeezzz."

"Don't worry, I promise that won't happen today. Who out of Christophe and Jai is the oldest.?"

"Christophe I think.....Yes, he's at least thirty."

It was pushing credibility a bit, but she had to work with what she had.

"How good is his French?" She asked.

"Perfect, like a native."

"I need you to give him a few instructions."

"Fine, though it might take a while to find him, this place is like a barn."

"Behind you is a pillar with lots of plants hanging off it. He's stood next to it, trying to look inconspicuous."

Good, he took her word for it without turning to look.

"You're good at this."

"I've worked with George in London, doing far tougher jobs than this."

"What do I tell Christophe to do?"

What indeed? It needed to be simple as she was making things up as she went along.

"When he sees us walk close to the Ostbys, he needs to approach Monique. He needs to tell her how much he admired her father, what a loss his death was to the world. Really lay it on thick. He mustn't get drawn into specifics. If they ask him question, he must say he doesn't want to spoil their evening and walk away. That's important, he mustn't get drawn into specifics."

"Alright, I'll tell him." Said Pablo.

Alone once he'd gone, she took a risk and looked directly at the couple, her targets for the night. There was space behind them to get close, but she ideally needed to be very close. Thoughts were like radio waves, easily distorted by other transmitters and background noise. There was an area of shadow near them, though it meant getting ludicrously close. She'd made up her mind by the time Pablo returned.

"Christophe knows what to do." He said. "He won't let us down."

"We'll need to kiss." She told him. "More than just a kiss, a full on snog."

Oh, that cheeky grin.

"I was hoping that might come later." He said.

It might, now that she thought about it. There was someone in her life, back in London. From her observations that was how the world worked, there was always someone, somewhere. Pablo was there though and he was proving to be good company. She held his hand.

"If we're a couple who snog in public, we should probably hold hands." She said.

"I can see the sense in that."

Her plan only consisted of bare bones, which didn't take long to explain. She told him as they walked, hand in hand, through the Restaurant Hausmann long bar.

"As Monique reacts we walk forward, into the shadow caused by a pillar. We'll then kiss, a long proper kiss."

"Really eating face as they say." He added.

"Oh yes.... They'll probably see us, but no one really takes any notice of a couple snogging."

Christophe did a good job, she'd have believed him if she hadn't known he was faking it. Monique's mind went from random thoughts about the food, her shoes, the weather; and turned to her father. Charlotte pulled Pablo close to her and moved closer to the Ostbys. The kisses were nice, yet the contents of Monique's mind took away any pleasure.

"We need to leave." She whispered.

They were outside and into a perfect night in Paris. Charlotte waited until they were the other side of the road before talking. Christophe and Jai were still at the door of the Hausmann, so Pablo waved to them.

"We have to do it tonight, I know where." She said.

"What do you mean do it tonight?" Asked Pablo. "We aren't prepared."

"It has to be tonight... They're meeting an American military man tomorrow. Someone who can supply the services of special services people, for a price. Not officially of course, just serving soldiers who need extra cash."

"The Ostbys didn't hang about." He said.

"No, they didn't. The last thing we need is another enemy, when we're already fighting the rogue's, and your Arturo might be a problem."

"He's not my Arturo."

"You know what I mean.....The Ostbys need to be interrogated and dealt with tonight."

Would he support her. She could use the whammy on him, though preferably she wanted him to be a willing ally. Lover too maybe, she was still pondering on that. Christophe and Jai had joined them.

"Did I do it right? Did it work?" Asked Christophe.

"It worked.....We're moving the mission up a bit." Said Pablo. "We're grabbing the targets tonight."

"Great." Said Jai.

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