

### Ruby 3

#### Chapter 6 – Das Geheimnis

**“Carrying duct tape everywhere had been a Spider thing, one of his amusing little eccentricities. An eccentricity so useful that they now all did it.”**

Δ

~Then~

#### **Paris – Five years previously**

The house was way out in the Paris suburbs; the taxi fare was enough to make even the Algerian cab driver smile. He'd liked Ruby, everyone liked Ruby. He'd rubbed his fingers together in the way universally accepted as meaning lots of money.

“Good area your friend lives in. Houses here cost more than I'll make in a lifetime.”

“Be back here in one hour, there will be another large tip for you.”

He'd be back and not just for the money. He dropped them outside the gates to the drive and they could have been in the expensive part of any European city. The house faced onto the drive rather than the street, so its full beauty couldn't be seen from the road.

“How important is this guy?” Asked Sarah.

“He runs a DGSE department specialising in East European gangs.”

The front of the house screamed French architecture, but it was hard to pinpoint exactly why. Ruby pressed the large brass button and almost expected a uniformed footman to answer the door.

Instead a bald man in his fifties opened the door and looked them up and down.

“You are Henri Gervex?” Said Ruby.

“Yes young lady. What can I do for you?”

For some reason Ruby lowered her voice to little above a whisper.

“George sent you a request for information on someone in the East, someone called Kurt. I am here to receive that information.”

She felt immense anger in him, it was what she'd expected. On the surface though he was still polite.

“You must be Ruby. Please come in, the weather is cold, but then winters in Paris are always cold.”

The house was dark and uninviting, she knew Henri lived alone. His wife had left him to live with her yoga instructor and there had been the death of his youngest daughter. A burglar in the early hours of the morning, a burglar who the eldest daughter had seen and tried to fight off. All to no avail though, the youngest daughter had been bludgeoned and died in hospital a few days later. Ruby knew the true cause of his daughter's death, as did George. It had been his leverage for information from Henri for several years; it was his way into the DGSE database.

“Please sit where you like.”

The room was pleasant; a TV was quietly showing a news channel that was broadcasting the day's events in France. There were numerous comfortable chairs around a low tiled coffee table. Ruby sat herself next to Henri. There was no offer of drinks; Ruby knew he wanted them to leave quickly.

“I am not here representing George,” said Ruby, “I am here because I need to find Kurt because of something he did to me, personally.”

Henri nodded at her and took a picture from a buff coloured file on the table.

“Is this your Kurt?”

It was a grainy picture taken with a telephoto lens. Someone had written Budapest and a date on it and it was him, it was her Kurt.

"This is him, do you have a second name for him?"

"I'm afraid not. He was photographed as part of routine surveillance of a terrorist suspect."

He was lying but it didn't matter. Ruby picked a name from his mind, Kurt Trifonov and it appeared he was born on the Bulgarian black sea coast. Other names and faces were associated with Kurt, two women and another man. Ruby memorised it all, names, places, known accomplices. Years of experience with George had given her the ability to remember huge amounts of data, as long as it was only for a few hours. Once back at the hotel she'd write it all out longhand. Ruby put her hand on Henri's and made a point of looking at the buff file.

"You know nothing else? There's nothing in that file?" She asked.

"No, just a few other picture with no names. Nothing of use."

It was a lie again, she knew the file contained everything she'd just pulled out of his mind.

"I'm sorry," she said, "George should never have blackmailed you. I may only be young, but I can understand your grief. I have lost people close to me in tragic circumstances. To lose one daughter at the hand of another....."

"Shut up! Shut up!.....Here take the damn thing!"

He threw the file at her; about six pages of A4 paper flew out and landed on the floor at her feet. Spider was on his feet and reaching for the replica gun he'd bought earlier, but she waved him back into his chair. Ruby slowly put the papers back in the file, making a point of not reading them. She placed the file back in front of Henri and once again put her hand on his.

"I was telling you the truth," she said, "George was wrong to use the information. I need your help, but I want you to help me voluntarily."

He was crying now, a bald middle aged guy crying over something he'd hidden from the world. No one knew, so no one could offer sympathy or advice. Ruby was probably the only person who'd shown him kindness in quite some time.

"Was I wrong Ruby? One daughter dead and all over a man not worthy of either of them. Was it wrong to help Monique cover it up?"

"No," said Ruby, "you'd have just lost two daughters instead of one."

He handed her the file and it contained the hard copy for what she already knew. Some hand written additions to one piece of paper said Kurt had been seen in Varna.

"May I keep this?" She asked.

"Yes, but please don't call on me again."

Ruby gave him one of her special smiles. External validation, idolatry, trust, all wrapped up in a smile from a beautiful girl. She'd meant it to cheer him up and ease her own guilt about reminding him of something he'd worked so hard to forget.

"I won't. We'll go to Budapest and then probably Varna on the black sea coast."

There was something in his mind now. He was trying to stop thinking about a filing cabinet in his office. Not because he thought she could see into his mind, but because the contents terrified him. The DGSE had a file that they hid from the rest of the world, a whole cabinet of files that no one outside of a few top people were allowed to see. Ruby picked up a name, or a description in German that was now filling Henri's mind.

"Henri, what can you tell me about Das Geheimnis?"

His mind did a flip and so did hers. Memories filled his head, memories of pictures of horrific crime scenes. Whole rooms full of dead bodies, killed in ways no forensic science could explain. He wasn't

just scared, he was terrified and then he had her by the throat and was trying to drag her out of his house.

"It was only a love tap Ruby, he'll be fine."

Spider had hit him and they were all out of the house, her still holding the file.

"What was all that stuff he was shouting about, Der Gremlins or something?" Asked Sarah.

"Probably nothing, he's still not right after the death of his daughter." Said Ruby.

She put her fingers to her throat and there were bloody marks where Henri had nearly throttled her. Once again she was glad of her decision to bring Spider along. Henri may have been past his prime, but he was still a very strong man.

"Was the file worth it?" Asked Spider.

"Yes, we now know a few names in Budapest and an address."

It was ten minutes before the taxi returned for them, ten minutes for Ruby to think about Das Geheimnis, and what the hell she was getting herself into.

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**~Now~**

Sophie wasn't happy about Ruby pacing up and down but it was far better than having her crying. Pacing usually meant a plan was being formed and there'd soon be action. Not that Sophie minded a quiet and lazy hour or so to enjoy a leisurely breakfast. Anna was helping her cook enough food for everyone and it seemed she did have a superpower after all; her scrambled eggs made people gasp with delight.

"Oh, you must tell me the secret to cooking eggs that taste this good." Said Sophie.

"Glad to, though isn't it time I was told a few secrets in return?"

There was an edge to Anna's voice. Sophie didn't need to pick up subtle body language or look into her mind. Anna was pissed off at being kept in the dark and Sophie didn't blame her.

"Can you serve up on your own for a minute? I'll ask Ruby about that."

"Are you sure, I don't want to upset her again."

"Do you want to know about us or not?" Asked Sophie.

"I do."

"Then serve breakfast..... This shouldn't take long."

Ruby had stopped pacing, she was now leant against a tree. No more tears and she'd wiped her face over to get rid of the ruined makeup. The woman she thought of as mum, now looked younger than her. Sophie invaded Ruby's personal space and simply stood there, waiting for a reaction.

"I forgot to thank you for standing guard last night." Said Ruby.

"That's alright.... I know you hate being asked if you're alright all the time... But are you alright?"

"Sort of..... I have the start of an idea."

"Good..... I came to ask if I could tell Anna about us?"

"Tell her what precisely?"

"Everything."

"Well.... She has risked her life just being with us, so I suppose we owe her the truth. Everything though..... That could start a very long time ago and never end. I'd let her ask what she wants to know."

"That sounds sensible. Do I tell her to keep everything a secret from Doc? I'm sure she would, even though they're sharing a bed."

"No, Doc has a right to know too. Plus I think Doc is a well-known teller of tall tales. No one would believe him anyway."

Sophie returned and just nodded at Anna and helped her make sure the latecomers had a decent breakfast. Once everything was cleared away Ruby was still pacing, a good opportunity to talk. Sophie made them both a milky coffee and they sat on the tailboard of one of the four wheel drives. "Alright, Ruby said you can know about us." Said Sophie. "What do you want to know?"

"Well..... Everything I suppose."

"Hmmm say that to Kallina and she'll start with Stalin's train thundering through Moscow. You have to be specific Anna. There must be things you've wondered about?"

"Lots and lots..... This name I've heard, Das Geheimnis. What does it mean, who are you?"

Sophie never remembered anyone asking her that. Ruby had always been around, or Kallina. They had always been the wise ones, the people who had the history firmly lodged into their mind. Sophie had to think it over for a few seconds to make sure her memories were accurate.

"I've no idea why we're known by a word in German, which literally means 'The Secret.' Ruby said the earliest intelligence reports on us were in German, so perhaps that explains it. Now the name seems to mean The Mystery, or even The Shadows. There is a real name for our people, but human vocal chords have trouble with it. So we're Das Geheimnis."

Anna was furrowing her brow, like a student hoping she remembered everything on the day of her final exams.

"Can I tell Doc any of this?" Asked Anna.

"I asked that and Ruby said you can."

Anna was one of those kinds of people. When she was thinking hard you could almost see the cog wheels turning in her mind. Not that Sophie was going to delve too deeply, unless Ruby asked her to.

"Ok, there's the whole age thing." Said Anna. "I listen to what people say. There are hundreds of years between when you were born, yet you all look about the same age. Are you all immortal or something like that?"

So many questions wrapped up in one. Again Sophie gave it some thought before answering.

"I'll answer the question you'll probably ask next." Said Sophie. "We're not totally human of course, but we're not totally Das Geheimnis either. When our ancestors realised their civilisation was coming to an end, they decided to use the same trick as the Neanderthals to survive."

"Aren't they extinct?" Asked Anna. "Unless you have another surprise for me?"

"You're part Neanderthal Anna, all humans are. There's still some argument about the exact numbers, but around twenty percent of Neanderthal DNA survives in modern day man. It was done by interbreeding and was probably an accident. The ancient peoples of the Karakum decided to create hybrids that were part human. It was done as a way to survive and wasn't one of their best decisions."

"Why, what happened?" Asked Anna.

"They used human women as biological mothers for their hybrids and many of them died. Out of the original hybrids brought into the world, only Kurt and Kallina survived. Out of the second attempt about thirty children survived, though we're now down to thirteen and a bit. Nari has a daughter who was left in London. At some point our existence became known to the major governments and they tried to wipe us out."

"Crap ! Are they still trying to kill you all?"

"No, Ruby managed to negotiate a peace, at least with the western governments. I think a few others still haven't put us on their Christmas card lists."

"Spider mentioned fighting North Koreans."

"That is a question for another day, Ruby has stopped pacing about."

"Wait.... You still haven't told me why you all look to be in your early twenties ?"

"Alright, though it will be the quick version. Kallina decided to place her precious children in stasis for most of the time. We were woken up for our education, but for most of the time.... We were kept in what felt like a deep sleep. It may sound crazy, but I've been told other mothers can relate to her motives. The world wanted to kill us, so she hid us away to keep us safe. We came through the years the easy way, while Kallina watched us through the centuries, hiding us and acting as our guard."

"How did she do that ? Is Kallina a scientist ?"

"No, not really..... She did it with nothing but witchcraft."

"Yeah right." Said Anna.

"Oh Anna, you wait until you see Kallina as Baba Yaga. Then you'll believe."

"I haven't seen Kallina at all for a while."

"Ruby sent her to help Olga."

"In Budapest ? How will she get there ? I said I listened to people I know where Olga is."

"Enough questions for today. I think Ruby wants to talk to us." Said Sophie.

"I have so many other questions."

"Tomorrow.....Over breakfast again in the morning."

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Olga liked Kallina, they'd hit it off almost from their first meeting. Both long term friends of Ruby's, it was unavoidable that they'd be thrown together. Kallina didn't even hold a grudge about her once trying to kill Ruby. Kallina had that kind of attitude to the past. The past was done and dealt with and couldn't be changed. There was no point in dwelling on it or nursing old grudges. Currently they were catching up on gossip. Just the amusing parts of course, just the snippets they could use to kill a few minutes until it was time to leave.

"Oh, please tell me everything ?" Asked Olga. "Trudy drenched and swimming in the River Lea is something I have to hear about."

"The way Ruby tells it, Trudy was trying not to hurt the woman." Said Kallina. "Trudy isn't brilliant at forcing her will on people though.... There was the incident with the guards near the Yalu River."

"I'm just a muggle Kallina." Said Olga. "All of Ruby's kids seem like super heroes to me. I'm sure they must all have skills they're good at..... And some they're maybe not brilliant at."

"Emotional too..... Trudy had always been a little over emotional." Said Kallina. "Anyway, she wanted to take the woman in the BMW out of the picture, without actually killing her. She used her gifts on the woman, actually getting in the car with her. Silly thing to do."

"Ruby said Trudy's motives were good." Said Olga.

"Well..... Ruby would, wouldn't she ? She can be far too emotional too, at times."

"So.... I take it Trudy's whammy wore off ?"

"It appears she was getting a little competitive with Lau, trying to be first to find the name Ruby was so keen to know. She pushed the woman too hard and the next thing....."

"The woman had driven the BMW into the river." Said Olga.

"Indeed she did and Trudy was lucky to escape as the car filled with water. Only her strength saved her, or so I've been told. She was able to shatter a side window with a punch."

"And the woman.....?"

"Drowned, so it all achieved nothing. That's the problem with Trudy.... She lets her heart rule her head."

Olga knew there was no point in arguing with Kallina, or pointing out the frequent contradictions in her views. She'd probably be praising Trudy as an example to be followed by the end of the day. Kallina was like the weather. Her views on the world could change in an instant and come from any direction. Igor was looking into the kitchen and nodding at her.

"It's time." Said Olga.

"Do you want my help with the rough stuff?" Asked Kallina.

At one time Olga might have been polite, but Ruby had told her to be honest.

"It's your home town Olga. Set parameters for Kallina that you're comfortable with." Ruby had told her.

"I do appreciate your offer Kallina, I genuinely do. It's just that Lacayo operates out of a respectable office block in the business district. No operating out a bar in the 8<sup>th</sup> District for him. It means everything today has to be done subtly and carefully ..... I'm sure you understand?"

"Yes, subtle isn't my best skill..... I'll let you deal with the rough stuff. Once we have KC Lacayo, I'll dig the information out of his head for you."

"He has friends in the government." Said Olga.

"Which one?"

"Just about all of them."

"Alright, I promise not to kill him."

Money was a little tight, but Olga had been able to call in a few favours. There were two brand new four wheel drive SUVs outside, containing Igor and six cartel gunmen she'd borrowed for a day or two. They'd come with a strict 'you break it, you pay for it,' clause. Olga was praying that none of them was silly enough to get killed. She got into the back of the second SUV, Kallina sat next to her.

"I don't use them very often..... But cars are growing on me." Said Kallina.

Olga didn't know any of the men, though Igor was already on first name terms with all of them. They were already giving Kallina a few wary looks. Olga didn't want to think how they might react if Kallina forgot about being subtle and careful. Their driver wasn't a fool though, he was bright enough to realise he had to follow the SUV in front.

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Spider thought it a bit of an anti-climax, leaving the eastern shores of Lake Turkana and heading for Marsabit. There was nothing else they could do though, the gateway Ruby needed to open had been sealed with some sort of almost unbreakable mojo. Almost was the key word though, he'd never known Ruby to be beaten if she put her mind to it. Keeping on the move was essential though. As far as they knew someone was still hiring assassins and as Spider had told Sarah that morning.

"Killing a few of them doesn't deter these people, it just puts the price up. Eventually a few serving black ops agents will be tempted to give is a try. So we need to keep on the move."

They were back in the vehicle they'd been in when leaving Nairobi, only now there was an empty seat while Kallina was in Budapest. Constanze had been left with them and rather unusually, the ancient feline was curled up on his lap. Like everyone else who has a cat on their lap, the urge to stroke the purring creature was irresistible.

"I'd never have thought of you as a cat person." Said Doc.

Doc was driving, with Ruby taking over if he needed a break. Doc and Anna had both become very curious, it had happened almost overnight. Ruby said that was fine, but Spider found it mildly irritating.

"I'm not sure Constanze is a cat." Said Ruby. "There might be a lot of demon in there, or maybe a fragment of a Jinn."

Constanze definitely recognised her name. She climbed off his lap and curled up on Ruby's. Spider decided to turn the tables a little and ask Doc a few questions.

"This place we're borrowing in Marsabit for a few days Doc. Is it like before, someone you know?"

"I have a contact who sells property." Said Doc. "This one will be empty.... I thought that was better, after the trouble in Gitaru. There's electricity there though and probably a cooker."

"Probably for the best Doc, after Gitaru." Said Ruby. "No one wants to put any more of your friends at risk."

"Are we sleeping on the floor?" Asked Sarah.

"Not sure, safest to assume you are." Said Doc. "There might still be a few beds there, I'm not sure. I'm trying to arrange a few foam mattresses for the next place."

"The next place." Muttered Sarah.

"We keep moving every three days, it's safer." Said Ruby.

The weather was warm and the scenery going past the window reminded him of his times in Belize with the British Army. The local food agreed with him, so all in all, Spider was quite enjoying the trip. As for Sarah and her gripes? They'd had sex three times the night before, all on the metal floor of a four wheel drive, covered only by a single blanket. Spider had noticed that although he thought the world of Sarah, she often enjoyed moaning for the sake of it.

"How long until we reach Marsabit?" He asked.

"We should be there by late afternoon." Said Doc.

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Kallina had always thought of Olga as being tough and resourceful, if perhaps a little bit disorganised. There had been the business in Vladivostok, where a Russian thug called Dimitri had taken over the bulk of her weapons trade. A bloodless coup and Olga had seemed to be relieved to give up a large part of her empire. Now there was something different about Olga, a new energy, mixed with drive and efficiency.

"Sorry, we're checking all vehicles today because of the EU conference."

The woman running the car park checks was polite, the good ones usually were. Windows had to be wound down; all faces had to be looked at, all paperwork presented. There were even two men running mirrors on poles under their brand new SUVs. Having tough looking henchmen was normal in Budapest; the woman smiled at everyone and seemed happy with what she saw.

"What's the conference about anyway?" Asked Olga.

"Expanding trade with the East." Said the woman.

"Which usually means trying to sell more stuff to China." Said Kallina.

"I'm just here to keep them safe.....Your paperwork is in order, you may proceed. Normally you could park anywhere, but please keep to Parking Level 2. Everyone is jumpy because of the conference and vehicles in the wrong place will be towed away."

Or worse, Kallina felt the woman thinking about the mess a controlled explosion would make of their expensive SUV. The woman had also been told not to keep using the word jumpy, by the head of security for the building.

"Of course, I understand." Said Olga. "Could you please tell the driver in the front vehicle where he needs to go."

The woman talked to Igor and they were inside the large building in the business district of Budapest. The conference was obviously popular, they became stuck behind a small traffic jam of cars, trying to negotiate the turns in the car park ramps heading down.

“There’s a limo causing the jam.” Said their driver. “Who brings a limo into an underground car park.”

“If you’ve got it, flaunt it.” Said Olga.

“I’m impressed, is our meeting even genuine ?” Asked Kallina.

“Oh yes, though Mr Cymerman is expecting to see a Miss V Kovács, the name on the paperwork I showed the woman outside. Everything else is fake of course.”

“Even the registration numbers on the vehicles.” Said the driver. “They belong to black SUVs of the same make, just not the ones we’re driving.”

Ruby had once said that Olga was the perfect strategist, that she could have probably beaten Julius Caesar in a well-organised battle. Kallina could guess how most of it was done, but Olga deserved the pleasure of telling her how it was all planned.

“How did you know they wouldn’t search the bags holding the weapons ?” She asked.

“Not their company policy, wealthy people don’t like to be searched.”

“Hmmm I can see them changing the policy after today.” Said Kallina.

“Hopefully not, I’m hoping to keep anything unpleasant inside the doors to the floor Lacayo operates out of. We’ve enough firepower to intimidate his guards into surrendering.”

“How good are his people ?” Asked Kallina.

“Pretty good, but not paid enough to die for him.” Said the driver.

Kallina hadn’t been introduced, though she easily pulled his name out of his mind. Pablo seemed bright, she just hoped he wasn’t all talk, she’d met a few like that.

“I’m impressed..... You set all this up in a few hours ?” She asked Olga.

“I’d love to say yes, but the identity papers are just one of a dozen or more fake IDs that I keep up to date... Just in case. As for the building security...About a year ago someone hired me to acquire some papers from a company on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor. This isn’t my first time here and probably not my last.”

Luckily the Limo turned off and they made better progress. Kallina liked the spot where Pablo decided to pull up and park. About equidistant between three exits, with no pillars to get in the way if they were running on the way back. Some jerk might block them in, but few plans survived unscathed from an encounter with the public.

“You know the plan.” Said Olga. “We’re all smiles and cuteness until we get inside the door.”

The elevators were busy with the delegates heading for the EU conference. It made the perfect excuse for Olga to call the offices of Mr Cymerman, to tell him she’d be a little late.

“Don’t want him telling security I haven’t turned up.” She said.

They really did look like a harmless group of people going to a meeting, until Olga took them into a CCTV blind spot near the entrance to the part of the building used by KC Lacayo and his associates.

“Less of a blind spot, more of a shadow caused by a large advertising screen.” Said Olga. “God bless the greedy marketing guy who had it installed. Stay close to me, the blind spot is quite small.”

All of the borrowed operatives were carrying large holdalls and Kallina now understood why. Not just the obligatory assault rifles, the bags contained body armour, helmets and all the other paraphernalia to make them look like a SWAT team. No cop badges of course, but who asks to see them when confronted by half a dozen heavily armed men ?

“No offence Kallina, but they probably know my face.” Said Olga. “Do you fancy being the lady from the State Protection Authority ? You even get a fairly good fake ID to wave at the camera.”

“I’d love to.”



The silencers on the assault rifles looked a bit out of place, but otherwise Kallina thought they looked what she was about to claim they were. They arrived at the door and the men stood in a rectangle behind her. Kallina really enjoyed banging on the door.

“Clear Choice Investments. Who are you here to see ?”

Kallina read the laminated ID card as she held it up to the camera to the right of the door.

“I’m agent Horvat from the State Protection Authority. We need entry to search the premises.”

“Why ? I don’t understand.”

A female voice that sounded young and a little scared. She’d probably just seen the men dressed like a SWAT team.

“It’s the EU conference, we’re searching every office in the building.”

A little muttering before a male voice arrived, who sounded older but still nervous.

“They have a lot of conferences in the building. We’ve never been searched before.”

“The president is attending today, we’re searching everywhere. If you refuse to open the door we will enter by force.”

“I’m not sure, my boss said.....”

“Open the door or you will be arrested.”

Kallina had said it all without shouting, the usual confident but threatening tone she’d heard so many cops and security agents use on people in the past.

“What is your name ?” She asked.

“Alright, alright..... Come in.”

Kallina entered first, noting the large windows overlooking another building. That might be a problem if things became unpleasant. The reception area was quite large, with three anxious looking men watching as Olga’s men entered the room. The young woman on the reception desk looked terrified.

“Nothing to worry about, just a routine search.” Said Kallina. “We’ll be out of your hair in five minutes, maybe less. If any of you are armed, I have to know now ?”

Everything should have gone smoothly, no one in their right mind tries to shoot it out with cops armed with assault rifles and wearing body armour. Later Kallina thought it might have been the tattoo on one man’s neck, she’d never seen a cop with a neck tattoo. Then there were the silencers, which were essential, but definitely looked out of place. Things might still have ended up quite differently if one of the men hadn’t said just three words.

“They’re not cops.”

The three men ignored the fact that their actions were going to get them killed. They were probably acting on instincts that suited other situations. As they reached for guns in shoulder holsters, the young woman on reception began to scream.

“Don’t..... Drop your guns or we will open fire.” Yelled Olga.

No use, they probably couldn’t hear anything, with all the screaming. Some people have a surprisingly loud scream and hers could have drowned out a jet engine at take-off. Olga’s men easily took care of KC’s hired guards, killing them before they’d managed to get their guns in their hands. The plan might still have worked, if it hadn’t been for the screamer at the reception desk.

“Fuck..... She’d screaming down the phone.” Shouted Kallina.

Again it went against logic, but fear can do that. The armed men who’d just killed her boss’s men were likely to kill her if she did anything stupid. Yet she’d picked the phone up, connected with someone and was now screaming at them. That was it, no dialogue, no please help me, just the same ear drum hammering scream.

“Don’t shoot her.” Shouted Kallina. “We’ll need what she has in her head.”

There was sympathy for the girl too, though Kallina would never have admitted to that. She grabbed the screamer and inserted an idea into her mind, one that instantly stopped the screaming.

“What did you do to her ?” Asked Pablo.

“I put the idea into her mind that if she didn’t stop screaming, I’d do far worse to her than the fears making her scream.”

“Christ Kallina, remind me to never upset you.” Said Olga.

Kallina noticed the phone was still connected to the downstairs reception desk. She hung it up just as alarm bells began to ring. Fire alarm bells probably, someone on the front desk had probably set them off, after deciding the screamer needed to be taken seriously. She pushed the girl and a roll of duct tape at Pablo.

“Here, tape her into a chair.....Wrists and ankles, but not the mouth, not yet.”

Carrying duct tape everywhere had been a Spider thing, one of his amusing little eccentricities. An eccentricity so useful that they now all did it.

“Every cop in Budapest will soon be here.” Said Olga.

“I can delay them a little. Soon they’ll work out it’s easier to smash through a partition wall, but it should give us an extra half an hour.”

The men looked at her strangely, but they’d obviously realised she was on their side. Kallina leant on the door, the only exit or entrance on the floorplans. The door and wall glowed a little, before taking on a reddish grey colour.

“It’s done, no one is coming through there today.” She said.

The girl next, which was hopefully going to be easy. Kallina knelt in front of her and asked just one question in a quiet voice.

“Where is the boss ?”

“I can’t..... He’ll kill me and my family.”

Kallina picked it all up from the scared and fractured mind of the girl. No wonder she was a screamer, she’d seen KC’s guards kill one man who’d talked to the wrong person.

“Tape her mouth, I’ve got everything, including the key code for the security doors.”

No one looked sceptical, they were all believers in her now. Kallina entered the six digit code to leave the reception area and enter the rest of the floor. As she walked through the open door, she saw four men armed with automatic shotguns. They began to fire as soon as they saw her.

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George Polandrous had been pleased to get the call. He wasn’t about to jump out of planes over deserts anymore, he was just glad to be in the loop. To him Ruby was still that wayward daughter, always getting into some sort of trouble. Not his real daughter of course, though he’d quickly become quite paternal about her.

“She still has that addiction to chocolate covered brazil nuts.”

She was fully grown now though, a woman who’d known far too much loss for someone just twenty six years old. There were the wunderkinds too and all the new friends added since she’d been a gifted girl he’d saved from....

“Actually she seemed to love hanging around with gangsters, like some biker chic.” He muttered.

She’d certainly given a few of them a run for their money. Still, George thought of it as saving her from their exploitation, even if he in turn had exploited her gifts.

“I did make her very rich in the process.”

No good looking back as they say, he wasn't moving in that direction. His daughter who wasn't really a daughter had grown up and now had a new support network. At least the call from Foxy's people meant he'd still know what was going on.

"Oh, not another cookery show."

George had at least two streaming subscriptions, but he wasn't in the mood for them. He switched off the TV and continued to pick at a lasagne he'd managed to overcook and turn soggy at the same time, not an easy thing to do. The sound of a motorbike in the street offered the opportunity to escape his own cooking.

"The age of social media and you're still sending out men on bikes."

The phone call had come out of the blue, a call on the phone he only used to contact Ruby if he had a new job for her, another secret needing pulling out of someone's head. Foxy was now at the centre of British intelligence though, he probably knew far more secrets than just his private phone number.

"Not just men, we have women on bikes now..... We're trying to be reconstructed privileged bastards these days." Foxy had replied. "Anyway, social media is a passing fad and secure as a rusty rice drainer..... Everyone knows that."

The call had ended with the promise that someone would turn up on a bike before he was likely to have gone to bed.

"Before Newsnight George, definitely before Newsnight."

George waited for the doorbell to ring. It was a woman at the door; she'd even taken off her crash helmet. She had her dark hair cut into a short bob and there was that whole standing very erect thing going on. George mentally had her down as an ex-copper, maybe even special branch. He was aware though that he might be overthinking it, and might be completely wrong.

"Mr George Polandrous?" She asked.

"Yes."

There was the phone business he remembered from the previous times. She aimed her phone at his face for a few seconds, before handing him a fairly thin A4 envelope.

"Thank you."

She smiled before leaving and George took the envelope into the lounge before ripping it open. He suddenly felt hungry and ordered a pizza, before wondering if he still had that half bottle of decent white wine in the fridge.

"The hand written note first I think." He muttered.

Foxy always included a hand written note, signed with a simple 'F' at the bottom. The notes were always fairly nonspecific and quite cryptic.

'Quite a few casualties for a holiday trip with a few friends.

So far no toes being stepped on that don't deserve crushing.

We will watch and offer support if it's appropriate.'

There was half a bottle left of Pouilly-Fuissé in the fridge. The pizza was probably still some way off. George sipped the wine while reading the two copies of press stories. Or attempting to read them, the photographs of dead people grabbed his attention.

'Nairobi'

Someone had written on the picture of a group of bodies in the street that could have been anywhere.

'SPAR supermarket – Budapest'

Had been written on the picture of a dead female body next to an overfull dumpster. For some reason George noticed the dead woman was wearing expensive looking clothing.

"Oh Ruby, what are you up to?" He muttered.

The copies of newspaper stories surprised him, he thought filing away cabinets full of news cutting was a thing of the past. At least someone had the sense to send him the English language versions of the stories.

'Police believe Nairobi deaths are the result of a sex fetish encounter that went tragically wrong.'

George read the whole piece, which was quite short and had probably ended up in the weird news section, with the stories about alien abduction and two headed snakes.

'Gang war erupts in 14<sup>th</sup> District. Two dead in what looks like gang warfare once again.....'

A long piece and George read it through twice. The pizza arrived just as he'd managed to get everything he needed from the article. George didn't normally sprawl himself over the sofa. He sprawled though, almost a full lounge with the cushions moved about. He sipped the wine and ate the excellent pizza.

"Just enough info Foxy, just enough." He muttered. "Olga will be behind what looks like gang warfare in Budapest. As for Nairobi? That'll be Ruby of course, taking care of....."

Assassins was the best guess, people sent to hunt down and kill Ruby and the thirteen. Once George would have started hiring mercenaries to back her up, but that hadn't always worked out too well. He'd wait and read the updates from Foxy.

"For now at least." He muttered

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