

Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

Chapter 12 – Gallaan Industries

“George Polandrous was one of life’s great organisers. He often attributed the success of his business more to organisation, than being a good financier.”

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Penny was a grown woman of sound mind. Apart from a painful hip, the doctors admitted she was in good health. She wasn’t a danger to herself or others, so she’d discharged herself from the private hospital George had booked her into. The idea had been to spend at least a week at home, having everything she needed delivered. A spot of rest and recuperation sat on the sofa, curdling her brain with hours of daytime television. Boredom set in within two hours of getting home. By four in the afternoon, she’d drifted off into an unintended nap.

“This will never do.” She’d muttered to herself.

The police and forensics people were still in the offices of the Polandrous Foundation, along with a few army types, still looking for something or other. George had made a few calls to make sure they allowed her into the building.

“Take a week off Penny, two if you want to.” George had said to her.

She’d refused, telling him about the unintended nap, which he didn’t seem to think was anything to get upset about. A friend of hers who’d retired had told her horror stories about getting up and watching it get dark outside, before going back to bed again. That wasn’t for her, even for a week. Penny did wonder about her own sanity though, when she saw the mess in the building’s foyer. She could have been at home, making her third pot of coffee.

“What have you done ?” She asked. “I hope you’re going to tidy everything up.”

The young man in a military uniform, was the only one there. He had to be the focus of her wrath. Someone had decided to set up their investigation centre in the foyer. Boxes everywhere, with piles of equipment. There were at least three computers on the coffee table. It had been the empty food boxes though; they had made her especially angry. The assorted investigators had obviously discovered every takeaway food establishment in the area.

“We will, you won’t know we’ve been here.” Said the young man.

“I hope so.....Make sure you do.”

Walking with a stick was making her feel less than happy about life. The elevator knew her, which improved her mood. It took her up to the floor where her beloved corner office was exactly as she’d left it. The file she’d been working on was still on her desk, which made her tremble a little. That was the good side of having a building full of police and assorted security people, she felt protected.

“We must beef up security a little, in the short term.” She muttered.

Hopefully, in the long-term Ruby would find and deal with whoever had paid the local villains to attack the office. Penny had just taken a writing pad out of a drawer, when someone entered her office. Another young man, but in plain clothes this time. At least he’d knocked before entering.

“Someone’s going for coffee.” He said. “Can we get you anything ?”

“Oh yes, the largest espresso they sell.”

She began to dig through her bag for money.

“No, that’s alright. On us and sorry for all the mess.”

So, word had got around, there was a moody CEO in the building. He gave her a nice smile before leaving, which improved her mood a little more. Penny wrote the first line of her draft plan to bring the office back to life.

‘Call close security people.’

They were the people who’d looked after George the last time there had been a significant threat. They didn’t just do close protection, they had contacts who’d provide muscular types to man the reception desk out of hours.

“No, first the phones have to be answered by a human.” She mumbled.

No one likes automated phone systems, no one. They had two wonderful ladies who were good at answering phones and dealing with clients. Their voices were known, they were the public voice of the Polandrous Foundation. Penny wrote a line above the first she’d written.

‘Get the phones answered by humans.’

The folder with staff details was in her drawer. Her scruffy writing on sheets of lined paper. She still preferred it to an online organiser.

“Dianne first, I can bribe her with a decent lunch and a car to collect her.” Penny muttered.

She dialled the number, hoping Dianne was as bored with daytime TV as she was.

“Hi, Dianne.....”

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Even some of the serious financial press had printed conjecture on how Gallaan Industries had come by its name. In an age of invented corporate names, Gallaan sounded too specific, too derived from something significant to whoever had first formed the corporation. Not that the current shareholders and directors had any idea about some of the covert sales that brought in all the nice profits every year. Pay decent dividends every year without fail, and shareholders rarely ask awkward questions at the annual general meeting. The banks loved Gallaan, stock markets loved Gallaan. If pressed you might find a critical column in the political pages, but you’d have to dig about to find it.

As for the origins of that name ? Gareth and Anne had met as students in Stuttgart, though neither of them was German. Their parents had recognised the value of learning modern languages, which was one of their things in common. Both of them spoke five or six languages and Anne had even learned enough Latin to read inscriptions on statues. Gareth had been born in New York, in the USA. Anne had been born in Poznań, in Poland. Not that you’d find it easy to trace back their roots. Quite early on in the formation of Gallaan, they’d realised the tax advantages of shell corporations and using agents as cut offs. By the time they were in their late twenties Gareth and Anne Lee had successfully vanished from having any official control of their own company. There were a few people around the world acting as proxy owners and managers, including one in the British Virgin Islands. They knew who was really pulling the strings. Not that there was any danger of them telling a soul about Gareth and Anne. They were making too much money to even think about rocking the boat.

Did we mention them falling deeply in love and marrying while still students ? Before you get all the warm feelings associated with young love. It’s worth mentioning that two years after getting married, Mr and Mrs Lee committed their first murder. A business rival, about to litigate against them for copyright violation. The first murder had been carried out by them, though they quickly hired people to do that sort of thing.

That name, we keep meandering away from that name. Where did the name Gallaan come from ? One night, after a bottle of wine and a pizza, the as yet unmarried students were deciding on a name

for their new corporate conglomerate. Genetically modified foods had been the big thing then, weapons were to come later. Their company could have been one of the majority of newly incorporated companies in Delaware. It could have gone bust after a year or two, leaving a few unpaid creditors and a small number of tax bills. But Gareth and Anne were clever, perhaps a bit too clever. Their new baby company had grown, into one the largest suppliers of weapons on the planet. As for that name..... Gareth and Anne had decided to get married. They'd written Gareth, Anne and Lee on a sheet of paper. An hour or two of weird anagrams had ensued, with nothing immediately obvious coming to mind. The wine probably effected their judgement. In the end they'd decided that Gallaan was a good enough mix of their names.

"It will do and it's original." Anne had said.

Gareth Lee was currently holding his wife's hand in a Paris hospital. Time had taken away some of the heat from their relationship, but Anne was still the love of his life. He'd had the occasional affair, though so had Anne. They argued, they threatened to leave one another. None of it ever came to anything. When it came down to it, they both knew their marriage was for life.

"She doesn't even recognise me, doctor." Said Gareth.

A private clinic specialising in neurological disorders. Gareth had been told it was one of the best places in the world to treat those kinds of disorders. Not that Gareth thought there was anything natural about Anne's confused mind. It had been them, the people who had invaded the Gallaan offices in Paris. Gareth's people were good and the masks had fallen off their faces during a fight. Facial recognition software had moved on by leaps and bounds, especially if you had contacts able to access Europol records. Fletcher Xavier Rusinek had done something to his wife, along with Eugenie Mason. Gareth had hired some good ex-special forces operatives and most of them were now dedicated to one mission, finding Fletcher and Eugenie. Alive of course, he wanted them captured alive.

"There is nothing wrong with her brain, not physically anyway." Said the doctor. "Every scan has shown nothing wrong."

"But.....It's as if she's been lobotomised." Said Gareth.

"I could understand you saying dementia or Alzheimer's, but lobotomised is very specific. If you know anything Mr Lee, it might help her treatment."

"We had some unwanted visitors to our office." Said Gareth. "One of my staff heard them threatening to lobotomise Anne. A temporary lobotomy, if there is such a thing."

He held his wife's hand and kissed her cheek. It was her eyes; they were the worst thing. There was nothing there, nothing at all. It was as if Anne was no longer in there. The doctor was looking troubled, as he looked over his wife's chart. Gareth hoped the doctor wasn't going to be awkward. He was paying the clinic enough to avoid awkwardness, or so he hoped.

"I have no wish to pry." Said the doctor. "But, these unwanted guests....Would you consider them to be capable of carrying out such a threat?"

It seemed doctors considered it as insulting to be asked to sign non-disclosure agreements. The hospital had no such worries though and had assured him that all the doctors they employed, would be covered by it. Any unattributed quotes from a medical source about Anne, in any newspaper and the man looking after his wife, was likely to have an accident. A fatal accident.

"Perhaps.....Actually, it wouldn't surprise me if they had done this to Anne." Said Gareth.

"Then I propose we simply watch and wait, for now. There are drugs, but they all have side effects and probably aren't appropriate in this case. We keep Anne comfortable, with mild sedation if she becomes agitated. If she shows no improvement in two weeks, we'll think again."

Gareth felt he was paying the hospital a lot of money to effectively sit on their hands. Though, being honest....It felt like the right course of action.

"Fine, but let me know if things change." Said Gareth.

Anne didn't react as he left, not even turning her head in his direction. He'd get all his people looking for the couple who'd done this to his wife. After they'd told him who else was involved, their deaths would be suitably unpleasant.

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Flex had told Olga the names of everyone in his family, or at least those currently living under her roof. She dreaded him finding another half dozen assorted relatives, who needed her protection. Munchkin was Munchkin, Olga felt no need to memorise her real name. Likewise, she had listened to his parents' names, before instantly forgetting them. Flex had a silly pet name for his kid brother, which Olga refused to dignify by using. His parents were his mum and dad; no further names were necessary. Plus, if anything were to happen to them....It was always easier to handle if you didn't know their first names. First names turned annoying visitors into real people, with real feelings and lives. In her line of work, Olga avoided getting to know people that well. The girl child seemed to like her, constantly coming into her office, uninvited.

"I need to make call Munchkin." Said Olga. "Go on, play with your brother."

"Can I come back later?"

"Maybe."

Lorenzo was helping Eugenie to contact the shipping agent his father used. It was part of the plan to get the Russians to do their dirty work for them. A shipping agent was needed and a reliable cut off. Olga had once seen the body of someone who'd tried to play a Russian arms dealer. No, only a fool pissed off the Russians without arranging for a cut off, a fall guy to take the blame.

She knew Dimitri was dead, but his organisation in Vladivostok was still thriving. Actually, it had been her business, but Dimitri had made his move. It was leave for Budapest or be killed, so Olga had moved to Budapest. Not that she ever held a grudge against Dimitri, business is business. She'd heard one of the women in his life had killed him, which didn't surprise her.

"He who lives by shagging around, shall get his balls cut off." She muttered.

Nadia was still in Vladivostok, or so she'd heard. Bohdan had taken over from Dimitri, but that was old news from over a year ago, maybe two years. Olga dialled the number on her cell phone, knowing someone the other end would pick up the call. The phone only rang twice before being answered.

"Yes?"

Only the voice said да? In Russian. A voice Olga thought she recognised though it had been a while. Actually, that just about summed everything up about her days in Vladivostok. It had been a while.

"Nadia Irina, is that you?"

"Yes, Olga.....I heard you were dead, then I was told you now own the biggest mansion in Budapest."

"Not quite the biggest, that's my next personal goal."

"Do you need any help? It's shit here." Said Nadia.

"I heard Bohdan was running the place. Didn't you like Bohdan?"

"Ahh, their mother had no imagination for names. There were two Bohdans and their father was a Bohdan. The Bohdan I liked was put in hospital by one of his cousins. He now runs the business.

Guess the cousin's name?"

"Another Bohdan, Nadia?"

"Yes, I always knew you were clever. The cousin is an idiot. Please tell me you have a job for me."

Nadia was good at her job and she knew the business Olga was in. It was rare, but a local employment agency still sent her people for clerical jobs, who had no idea what her real business was all about. Plus, as far as she remembered, Nadia wasn't squeamish. People could get hurt; blood could be spilled. It was all part of the business they were in.

"I'll do you a trade." Said Olga. "You can get on the plane. I have the perfect job for you. You can even stay at my house until we find you somewhere. Good money, you know I pay well."

"So, what do you want in return?" Asked Nadia.

"I need a cut off, an expendable cut off."

"I have the perfect woman." Said Nadia. "She dropped Dimitri in it a while back, so she's owed a little pain. If you're serious about the job, I can bring her details with me."

"I'm serious, get your arse on a plane."

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They'd stopped to refuel in Garacad and Spider had manned one of the heavy guns, just in case. Garacad was in the autonomous state of Puntland. Still Somalia really, though no one wanted to use the terms badlands or bandit country. They were building a new harbour in Garacad, though Max had said they'd been building it for quite some time. Good times might arrive in the town, or they might not. In the meantime, a few of the construction crew were happy to be paid by Max. They were his refuelling team and there was another similar refuelling location in Bosaso. After that and with a little luck, they'd be in Aden.

"Are you expecting trouble?" Asked Spider.

"Always, Spider." Said Max. "There are a lot of local warlords who'd love to get their hands on this patrol boat."

The boys, Damu and Enki, followed Max everywhere. Enki was the slightly shorter out of the two and he seemed fascinated by the weapons the patrol boat carried. The boys had learned bits of French from their mother and bits of English from their father, Max. Various bits of street Somali, they must have picked up from the local population. Barely larger than toddlers, the boys put Spider's language skills to shame. Max wasn't keeping the boys off the deck, which indicated he wasn't expecting serious trouble. By the time Sarah arrived with coffee, Max was walking up and down the jetty.

"I thought you'd appreciate coffee." She said. "How long until we're ready to leave?"

The coffee would be instant, but Sarah was carrying a packet of digestive biscuits.

"Oh, nibbles too." Said Spider. "I am spoiled.....Max said we should have left half an hour ago. He's gone to chivvy the refuelling crew."

"I was asked to bring the boys below decks." Said Sarah. "I can see Damu. Have you seen Enki around?"

"Not for a while. He sometimes hides from his mum."

"There are times I wish I could." Said Sarah. "Age and adopting children, hasn't mellowed Monique Gervex."

No one did attack the patrol boat while it was moored at the jetty. Twenty minutes later they were on their way. As well as the heavy gun, Spider had control of two ship to ship missiles, which meant he had a radar repeater screen in front of him. There had been blips on the screen all the time, mainly fishing boats. Maybe the occasional pirate vessel too, though he doubted if they'd attack the patrol boat. The Russian built boat probably had better weapons than some small navies. Two larger blips on the screen were ahead of them and weren't moving.

"So, what are you guys up to?" He muttered.

They had been moored up for a while and the refuelling crew hadn't seemed in a hurry. It might have all been part of a trap. When Spider heard muttering in the headphones he'd been ignoring, he took them off their hook and put them on.

"Two large vessels, probably pirates." Said Max. "Between us and the open sea. So far, their intentions aren't clear."

Spider couldn't see the vessels with assumed dubious intentions. He was in the housing surrounding the port side heavy guns. The pirates, if they were pirates, were over towards the starboard. From the radar repeater, he could see Max had decided to carry on moving, while the pirates remained motionless. To Spider it was only going to end one way. There was going to be a fight with the pirates.

"Qu'est-ce qui ne va pas?" (What's wrong?)

Perfect French coming from behind him. Enki had obviously been hiding from his mum. He'd scrunched himself up on the floor, in a gap under the control desk. Tempting to take the child to his parents, there just wasn't time. Spider didn't mind kids, there were even rumours he'd been one once. It was just that Enki was in a dangerous place at the wrong moment. Spider decided he had to be firm with the kid.

"Stay where you are, there might be trouble. Stay put ! Do you understand ?"

"Yes."

Enki was crying, though he was staying put. Spider knew he'd never be surrogate uncle of the year, but he just wanted to keep the boy safe. Through his headphones came the voice of Max. Quite a calm voice given the circumstances.

"The pirates aren't moving. We have to consider we're now at battle stations."

Far better than all the alarms you hear on TV and films. Max didn't need an annoying klaxon; everyone would know what to expect. Being on the wrong side of the boat became frustrating when the firing began. Spider could hear the heavy guns on the starboard side and the replying fire from the pirates. He had looked at the screen the night before, after Max had asked him to man the guns during the refuelling. Lots of Russian on the screen, though it was surprisingly easy to aim the missiles. Move a cursor over the radar image of the first pirate vessel and press a button. That was it, he'd target locked the pirate ship. Repeat for the other vessel and the missiles were locked on until fired, or he released the lock. The pirates could be miles away later that day, but a target lock would still find them.

"Well....I'm eighty percent sure I'm right." He mumbled. "Maybe eight five percent."

Spider was basing his actions on an assumption. He was assuming the designer of the patrol boat was logical and sane. There is a saying though, about assume making an Ass out of U and Me. To Spider there was no way the missiles were going to slam into the port side of the patrol boat, in an attempt to hit the ships, they were aimed at. If he died in the blast, Enki would die too, which worried him quite a bit. The boy was still crying, so Spider ran his hand through the kid's hair.

"We'll be fine kid." He said. "Très bien." He added, giving his rusty French an outing.

Enki smiled and it was impossible not to pull the boy up onto his lap.

"You have to keep still." Said Spider.

"I will."

The pirates made the decision for him. A burst from a heavy machine gun cut through the bulkhead above his head. Spider and the boy were safely inside a steel armoured shell, but someone had screamed out.

"Here we go Enki, here we go." He muttered.

They didn't instantly become vapourised when Spider hit the fire button, which he saw as a good sign. The missiles ran from the patrol boat in a straight line, he could see them through a slit in the armour. Once well clear of the boat, they curved around to the right and vanished from sight. No more than two seconds later, there were two large, loud detonations.

"We're still in one piece, kiddo." He said.

Spider had assumed the radar images would vanish after a direct hit. It was that assumption thing again. The pirate boats were still there, pinging away on the screen. The cheers from outside told him all he needed to know. The enemy were no longer a threat and were hopefully about to sink to the bottom of the ocean. There was still the sound of gunfire, so he left it a while before carrying the boy out onto the deck. They hadn't escaped unscathed. Sophie was leading a group of wunderkinds, putting out several small fires. Not using their gifts, they were doing it old school, with fire extinguishers. Lily was helping too, despite still having a pronounced limp.

"So, you found my son." Said Max. "Where was he hiding?"

"He was in the port gun housing." Said Spider.

"By accident, he chose the best place."

"Did we do it, Max? Did we beat them?"

"Yes we did....Now give me Enki. His mother has been going frantic."

Spider walked over to the starboard side and the two pirate ships were burning from stem to stern. There were bodies in the water, which he hoped were all dead pirates and none of their crew. He remembered the sound of someone crying out, when he saw Sarah crying. Ruby was there too, trying to comfort Sarah.

"I feel so bad, I hated her for so long." Said Sarah.

If Spider had wanted to be cruel, he could have said, that could be said of a lot of people Sarah knew.

Her crying looked to be genuine grief though, which made him think of one person in particular. It couldn't be her though, nothing could hurt her.

"Was it Anna?" He asked Ruby.

"Yes."

"Is she badly injured?"

"She's dead, Spider."

There was always a probability one of them would die, death was a dark shadow, perpetually waiting in the wings. It couldn't always pass them by. Sooner or later, someone's luck had to run out. Spider had always liked Anna, even if she could be a bit scary. Anna had once almost had a fight with Sarah, over him. Even the most reconstructed male had to like any woman who'd fight over him, and Spider wasn't even slightly reconstructed. He found himself crying, just a little, as he hugged Sarah.

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George Polandrous was one of life's great organisers. He often attributed the success of his business more to organisation, than being a good financier. Ruby had to know what had happened in London and what Olga was organising in Hungary. There it was, that word again, organisation. George was certain the people running Gallaan Industries would have flawless communications. They'd know everything that happened in their organisation, as it happened. Ruby needed the same kind of information, no matter where she was in the world. No matter how primitive the phone systems might be, there had to be a reliable way of keeping her informed. He rang the bell and Monique opened the door of the home she shared with Nazili, last of the Arbiters. She looked at the bag with two bottles of red wine in it, before looking at the heavy backpack he was wearing.

“What have you been up to George ?” She asked.

“All sorts of mischief.” Said George. “Mainly though, I’m getting organised.”

George often hugged Ruby, she did feel like his family, or rather, he felt like part of her family. He was never sure if it was alright to hug the other wunderkinds. An HR consultant had given a talk at the Polandrous Foundation. She’d left him dazed and confused, with a lasting dread of getting it wrong. He hugged Monique though. A one armed hugged, with her hugging him back.

“Someone called Snowy called.” Said Monique. “He said the cargo plane will wait for them in Aden. He said it was the largest he could arrange.”

“Good, Ruby knows Snowy. She’ll recognise him and realise he’s on her side.”

George followed Monique into the lounge, where a TV was showing twenty-four-hour news, with the sound down. He placed the wine on the coffee table, but carried on wearing the backpack.

“He’s set it up in the spare bedroom.....It’s a bit. Well, George....Best if I just show you.”

Once the bedroom door was open, the pulsating purple light gave everything an unreal quality.

“I call it Nazili’s Stargate.” Said Monique.

George had given Nazili a problem to solve, how to communicate with Ruby and the wunderkinds, no matter where they might be. The pulsating, swirling ball of light was obviously Nazili’s solution to the problem. The bedroom was obviously no longer any use as a bedroom. There were all sorts and makes of backpacks scattered across the floor and the bed was pushed against a wall.

“By covering electrical components with kitchen foil, we can send anything to Sophie.” Said Nazili.

“It runs twenty-four seven and makes a strange noise.” Said Monique. “Only a low noise, but it carries at night. I’m waiting for my neighbours to start a petition about it.”

Monique said it with a smile, but George sensed some real tension between them.

“With luck you won’t have to put up with it for long.” Said George. “In layman’s terms, how does it work ?”

“Sophie is the most sensitive, so I use her to fix a point.” Said Nazili. “I need to make sure she isn’t somewhere public. I then open the conduit to her and literally drop the package onto the portal.”

“Yes, be careful in here George, we’re not good on health and safety.” Said Monique. “It needs a guard really. Human tissue isn’t the same as inanimate objects. Touch the portal and you’ll go to Sophie, though I dread to think what would arrive at the other end.”

“We bought a hamster to test the effect.” Said Nazili. “After a little thought, we now have a pet hamster. We called it Lucky, for obvious reasons.”

“I’ll introduce you to Lucky before you leave.” Said Monique.

“Can Sophie send things back to us ?” Asked George.

“Yes, she can concentrate and open the conduit.” Said Nazili. “It tires her though and causes headaches. I can see ninety percent of the packages going one way, from us to her. There’s a purple flash near her and the package literally appears out of nowhere.”

It all sounded fine, George didn’t envisage a need for Sophie to send much back to London. George took off the backpack and gave a large jiffy bag to Monique.

“This is everything Ruby needs to get up to date.” He said. “All the Gallaan data, everything. Probably far too much to read, but she has Todd to help her.”

“Charlotte is no fool, she’ll understand the technical stuff.” Said Monique.

The jiffy bag was wrapped in bubble wrap, before being wrapped in kitchen foil, to stop any chance of scorching.

“I’ve cleared every local corner shop of bubble wrap and kitchen foil.” Said Monique. “I’m going to go further afield to buy the next bag full. Right.....Now I just drop it on the portal.”

The jiffy bag vanished, while Nazili seemed to be concentrating on something. It seemed he was briefly touching minds with Sophie, to confirm the package had arrived. There was a lot about Nazili's system George knew he'd never understand. For reliability though, it would give DHL a run for their money.

"Oh, dear George." Said Nazili. "We don't join minds for long, it can cause problems for Sophie. She did mention something important, though there were no details. It seems the patrol boat was attacked and Anna was killed."

"I thought nothing could hurt Anna." Said Monique.

"That is terrible news." Said George. "Let's just hope she's the first and last of our family to die."

Life had to go on, though George did feel guilty as he pulled the weapon from the backpack.

"Smaller than the older version, but it packs a harder punch." He said. "It's from Foxy and he needs Ruby to test it when there's an opportunity. No plugging in with this version of the energy weapon. It steals power from any nearby electrical devices. He can't give us a huge number, but there will be a few more coming our way. He mentioned that a test on human bad guys would do."

"Rather than turning one of us Das Geheimnis to sludge." Said Nazili.

"I'm sorry, Nazili." Said George. "I am just the messenger."

"No, I do understand, the rogues need stopping. Ishel may be minding her own business for now, but it won't last. Evolution George, survival of the fittest. Eventually Ishel and her rogues will make their move to rule or destroy mankind. Ruby has to destroy them first."

"Hmmm.... This energy weapon will be awkward to wrap." Said Monique.

George helped, wrapping the weapon in layers of bubble wrap. By the time it was covered in kitchen foil, they'd just about used all of it up. George lifted the untidy bundle and dropped it onto the portal. It was nice to think of a purple flash on the patrol boat, with an energy weapon appearing out of thin air.

"I like this....I really think we've cracked the communications problem." Said George.

"Night time will probably be best." Said Nazili. "Sophie can wake up to find a pile of jiffy bags next to her bed."

George was then introduced to Lucky, the hamster. The tiny creature was now going to be a spoiled pet, rather than having his cell structure ripped apart in the name of science. Someone, probably Monique, had bought him a large cage to run around in. Before he left, the subject of Anna was talked about a little more. George could see that being how they'd all cope with it. A little at a time, a few memories here, an anecdote there.

"Did she have anyone?" Asked Monique.

It was a subject that was briefly talked about every time Ruby set off on the road less travelled. It was in some way assumed that someone would know someone, who mattered to anyone who might not be coming back. It was a stupid way to do it, though in fairness, it had worked well in practise.

"I believe we're the only people she had." Said George.

"How about a funeral? She has to have a decent burial." Said Monique.

"I'm sure Ruby will take care of that in Aden." Said Nazili.

"Yes, Ruby will make sure Anna has a proper funeral." Said George.

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Lorenzo Bianchi knew the shipping agent might not survive what Olga was planning. The man was deeply unpleasant, but that didn't mean he deserved to be found dead in a gutter. The key thing that had made Lorenzo think to hell with it, what happens, happens; was one particular piece of information his father had once told him about Elio Fulci and the way he did business.

“You can never trust Fulci.” His father had told him. “But sometimes dishonest people can be useful.”

Lorenzo had been young, still at an age when anything his father said was treated like the word of God. Fulci was a shipping agent, a very successful one. He had enough money to bribe officials, have paperwork forged and even bribe ship owners to deliver just about anything, to just about anywhere. The digital age hadn't slowed Fulci down, not in the slightest. When forging bills of lading became a thing of the past, Fulci hired hackers to change digital documents.

“I'll introduce you to him today, Lorenzo. Never trust him, ever.” His father had said. “One day though, you might have need of his services.”

A story had been told before a twelve- or thirteen-year-old Lorenzo had been introduced to a middle aged Fulci. His mother had added a few details, echoing the idea that the shipping agent wasn't to be trusted.

“Everyone thought it was an accident, but we knew better.” She'd told him.

There are always groups of people wanting to get from one part of the world to another, even if they didn't have the paperwork to do it legally. Then it was mainly refugees speaking Arabic, but sometimes it was black skinned people from Africa. The trade in moving illegals around the world had been huge then, though the trade has never gone away.

“Fulci made the mistake of being known to a few of his intermediaries.” According to his father. Desperate people are never fussy where they go, as long as it's safe. Italy was part of the European Union, inside the freedom of movement zone. Italy was as good as any other part of the EU and it had some fairly soft borders.

“It started off as an accident, nothing more than that.” His mother had said.

A tired driver and torrential rain in the mountains near Brenner. The road was narrow and a car ran into a truck with several families in the back. By the time someone senior from the gang running the refugee pipeline had arrived; the road was full of confused refugees. No one could speak their language and one or two looked seriously injured. After a call to Elio Fulci, all the refugees had been killed, shot at close range. The gang did a reasonable cover up job, burying the bodies in the woods near Brenner. The truck was towed away for repair and they might have got away with it, if it hadn't been for a very old and clunky Renault Five.

“They killed the couple in the car that had hit the truck.” According to his father.

The elderly couple had been buried in the same shallow pit as the refugees. Cars though, they're not that easy to dispose of in a wood, on a rainy night. It had been pushed into the trees and covered in branches; badly covered in branches. There might still have been no bad outcome for the pipeline gang, if it hadn't been for a dog; a very curious dog.

“The dog found the car.....It was bad for the gang then, very bad.” His mother had said.

One thing led to another, especially after the police found the shallow pit with over two dozen bodies in it. Whole families, the press went crazy, even a few overseas newspapers. The gang were being rounded up, starting with those at the lower end of the pay scale.

“Fulci was scared the bosses might talk, flip as the Americans call it.” According to his father.

Fulci had money, as has been mentioned before. He hired some of the best assassins to kill the intermediaries who knew his name and involvement in the pipeline. It made the slaughter of the refugees look mild, though the press never linked all the deaths. To the police many of the assassinations looked like accidents, while others looked like street crime that had ended badly. The worst, the deaths of entire families, were put down to botched home invasions. It had been a bad year for home invasions.

“So, Fulci is a man useful to know, but never trust him.” According to his dad.

Lorenzo remembered that Fulci looked like any other middle-aged man with receding dark hair, whose stomach was trying to climb over his belt. Not very impressive, but such people rarely are. Look like a crook and the police would take an interest, so Fulci lived a fairly modest existence. He looked like a man in a low level, poorly paid job and the police rarely bothered him. There was one thing that still nagged at Lorenzo’s mind though, sometimes giving him sleepless nights. How had his parents known so much about the massacre of the refugees ? Had they been part of the pipeline ? Not that he ever intended to ask them.

“Is that him ?” Asked Jakub.

“Yes, that’s Fulci.” Said Lorenzo.

Fulci was in Milan, with one of Olga’s vast array of contacts aiming a phone at him; covertly of course. A facetime game of pick the bad guy you want to use as a stooge in a plan. Lorenzo was sat hundreds of miles away in a café in Budapest. Olga had loaned him Jakub, because as she’d said in her own words.

“You need someone with local street cred, Lorenzo.”

The café location was to use their WiFi. When it came to online security and covering their trail, Olga’s people were pros.

“Once you say yes, it pushes a button that can’t be un-pushed.” Said Jakub. “Do you want us to approach Fulci and use him as a fall guy ? Think about it Lorenzo.”

“Nothing to think about, the man is a bastard....Approach him.”

The phone image went dead as Olga’s contact went to begin the process of offering Fulci a deal too good to refuse.

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