

Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

Chapter 7 - Flex

“Eugenie knew the physics, just about everything we think of as solid, was mostly empty space between particles. In theory, if the particles aligned just right, your coffee cup on the table, could fall right through it.”

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Todd wasn't exactly scared of Arbiter Nazili Anso, it was more like a very healthy respect. The last Arbiter of the race who had ruled the planet before mankind had evolved, or even existed. A truly powerful user of the gifts the wunderkinds were still learning how to use. Potentially Nazili was a game changer, if he didn't have such strong views on spoon fed knowledge.

“I can give you hints Ruby, maybe point you in the right direction. As for gaining real and lasting improvement in your skills.....You must do that for yourself. Trial and error, the way you learned how to walk through solid walls.” He'd told Ruby, more than once.

Ruby and the thirteen had hoped for a mentor, but Nazili was more like a guru. Lots of really mind stretching ideas, little of it immediately useful. Ruby had become so used to Nazili purely being a passive source of wisdom, that she hadn't invited him to join her. As Todd viewed it, if Nazili wouldn't give Ruby any concrete help, he was hardly likely to help him.

“You might be surprised, Todd.” Isobel had said. “Call Monique and get her on your side. Ask her to invite you for a meal one evening, soon.”

Monique, who had been born somewhere in the middle east, though even she had no idea exactly where. No clear idea how old she was, Monique had been the wunderkind equivalent of a walk-in. She'd used her own devices to find others like her and by luck, she'd found Kallina. Tall, with dark hair and looks that indicated somewhere on the Mediterranean coast. Many assumed she was Italian. She opened the door to her rented flat, a few seconds after he'd rung the bell.

“I brought wine.” Said Todd. “I know he likes wine.”

Monique was poised, she had poised down to an art form. Add on the gorgeous smile and Todd found it hard to imagine her seducing Spider on several occasions. Sharing a bed with Nazili was different. They might look very different, but they had a lot of shared DNA.

“Relax Todd, you'll be asking if he takes sugar next. You knew Nazili in Africa, just be normal around him.”

“I'll try my best.”

The subject of their discussion was sat in a recliner in the lounge, reading. The last surviving Arbiter was wearing a pair of chinos and a plain white T shirt. He looked different to humans, very different. For a start he was just over seven feet tall and his head was elongated at the back. His facial proportions were wrong too, though it was hard to say why. Then there were the protuberances from his body, where no human had parts to their body. Ruby had been right though. In a long coat and a hood, he'd rarely got a second glance in Hackney.

“Monique ordered Pizza; I hope that's alright ?” Asked Nazili.

“Fine, I brought a bottle of red.”

It was a civilised way of bumping knuckles. The food arrived and they drank the bottle of red Todd had bought on the way. After they'd eaten, Todd left an acceptable period of time, before mentioning being concerned about Ruby.

"Isobel told me Ruby isn't into taking precautions, in case the worst happens." Said Todd.

"She isn't.....I never remember her doing anything like that before." Said Monique.

"You can see why her note worried me." Said Todd.

Isobel had talked to Monique, who'd then brought Trudy into the general conversation. Todd knew that he was talking to two people who were fully briefed.

"Be truthful young man." Said Nazili. "Tell me what you'd like me to do, to help you?"

Isobel had called him that afternoon, telling him to be bold when asking Nazili for help.

"Use your imagination Todd, you might be surprised what he agrees to." She'd said.

The Arbiter had already refused to transport Ruby and the wunderkinds across the globe. He'd also said no to searching for Lily in his own unique way. It seemed all of that fell into the spoon-feeding criteria. Helping him though....Monique seemed to think that was different.

"Ideally....I'd like you to find Ruby and take me to her, or send me there in some way."

"You'd like to go now?" Asked Nazili.

"Not right now, I'd like to collect few things first."

Nazili used gestures as part of his magic, or whatever it was he used. He had one more finger on each hand, than most humans. He rubbed the joints on his second finger, with his thumb. A glowing orb of silver light appeared, just for a minute or so.

"I see time differently to you Todd, past and future are all the same to me, though neither is unchangeable. I can see Ruby and I can tell the optimum time for you to join her. Changes can happen though; the future always has uncertainties. So does the past, but the past isn't our concern. Ruby is on a ship, a day or so from Mogadishu. She will need you most just after she arrives in the docks. Return here the morning after tomorrow, and I will take you to her. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes Nazili, that is very acceptable." Said Todd.

"Can I go with him?" Asked Monique.

"No, just Todd.....Bring weapons young man. You will need them."

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Eugenie put her hands on the wall and closed her eyes. She'd expected to find Flex in the villa, he'd be the intense one, with a head full of chaos and noise. The couple who went everywhere with him would be the ones moving around, no good security team ever remains static. A couple of casual tough guys hired in Budapest and that should have been everyone in the building. It wasn't though, there were two children upstairs and two adults sat in a room downstairs, quite a tiny room. It wasn't as expected and it needed thinking about. She turned and was impressed with Jakub and his team. She knew where they were, but they'd all crouched down and vanished into the long grass. Eugenie crouched next to Jakub and whispered just loud enough for him to hear.

"Flex is upstairs, not moving, probably asleep. Large room to the left as you go up the stairs. I need him alive, that's important."

"I understand." Said Jakub.

"The man and woman who guard him are working a patrol pattern. You'll need to take them out quickly."

"Yes, that was the plan."

She couldn't see him in the dark, but she knew he'd be giving her a look. It was all part of the plan, so far.

“There are a couple of local guys, both sat just inside the front door, maybe even asleep. There is something strange though, a couple who look to be captives and two children. Are you sure this villa is a legitimate rental ?”

“Yes, Olga is never wrong about that kind of thing.”

They’d talked for long enough, maybe too long. It was either going to happen, or she’d abort the plan and go back to Budapest. Eugenie hated the idea of giving up, she’d felt the two kids were young and wide awake. Too young to be left as captives of Flex and his people.

“Alright, we’re going ahead with the plan.” She said. “The couple are in a small room behind the main staircase. Probably a locked room. Getting them out unharmed, is now your main priority.”

“I understand.....Where are the children ?”

“Upstairs in a room opposite where Flex is in bed. I will go for the children.....And then Flex.”

“I’ll come and help once we’ve cleared the lower floor.” Said Jakub.

Eugenie returned to leaning on the rear wall of the villa, while feeling what the occupants were doing. A clock was running though, their previously agreed moment when Jakub’s heavily armed team, would attack the villa from the front and back. Eugenie wasn’t as good at moving through solid objects as Ruby, nowhere near as good. Her confidence had improved after Ruby admitted it still made her anxious.

“Just thinking about if I get it wrong.” Ruby had told her. “Not because I’ll be dead, but I’ll look so stupid if someone finds me, half in and half out of a wall.”

There had been a whole conversation about things they’d both find embarrassing, if they died while doing them. Unsurprisingly the top five were all sex related.

“No time to fuck about.” She muttered to herself.

Eugenie knew the physics, just about everything we think of as solid, was mostly empty space between particles. In theory, if the particles aligned just right, your coffee cup on the table, could fall right through it. All Eugenie had to do was align her particles with those of the wall and she could walk right through it, easy. Not as easy as using the heavy, locked back door, but she’d chosen a part of the wall close to the stairs. She put her hands flat on the wall and made them vibrate in a way she didn’t really understand. Her gifts were natural to her and usually worked, which was all that really mattered. Did most people understand how their eyes worked?

There was a softening of the wall beneath her fingers and Eugenie stepped through the wall and into the house. Good, she’d arrived in an area of darkness. She waited for the noise and sound of stun-grenades, as Jakub and his team attacked. Eugenie ran up the stairs, before flattening herself against the wall next to the door. Good the kids were on the far side of the room. She placed her palms on the door and used just enough power to knock off its hinges. Eugenie stepped into the room.

“Don’t be scared kids, I’m here to rescue you.” She yelled.

They were scared of her, terrified. A quick shallow look into their minds showed they weren’t thinking of her as a rescuer.

“Go away, or our brother will kill you.” Yelled the girl.

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Luca Lengyel had looked after the wunderkinds in Africa, she understood something of the way their bodies worked. They could tolerate a type O blood transfusion, though it was better to take blood from one of the thirteen. She had no idea why, but they could all be given each other’s blood, with no problems. The main thing was to keep them safe and make sure they weren’t going to bleed to death. Then Luca knew to leave them alone and let their own incredible bodies do the healing. No antibiotics were needed, their bodies fought off infections incredibly quickly. Luca was tending

Kallina as though she was one of the wunderkinds and it seemed to be working. The regular transfusions of fresh blood, definitely worked.

"I'm giving you Ruby's blood this time." Said Luca.

"I am honoured." Said Kallina.

"Spider wanted to give blood. He seemed upset when I told him it was the wrong type."

Kallina no longer needed dressings on her wounds, the skin had regrown over most of her body. For some reason there was still a raw place on the back of her left thigh, but that was closing up. Her head might always be bald, though that was aesthetics, rather than anything medical. Charlotte had already offered Kallina one of her red-haired wigs. For a woman old enough to remember Stalin entering Moscow by train. And who had looked like a bag of rotting flesh, Kallina's recovery was truly miraculous.

"Did they go to look for the one like us?" Asked Kallina. "It's important, did they go?"

"Yes, they used one of Captain Sargsyan's drones to find the right spot." Said Luca. "Ruby said they should be there and back in two or three hours."

"The captain of this ship has drones?" Asked Kallina.

"Yes, they're his pride and joy. Reconnaissance drones with propellers, they're launched off the rear deck. He uses them to look over places he's never been before. It seems one saved his life once....A new customer who wasn't what he seemed. He let Ruby use one of his toys, on the condition that she replaces it, if anyone shoots it down."

"Well, did they? Shoot it down?"

"No, they looked quite civilised. A man and a woman next to a tent. Ruby and a few of the others have gone to speak to them."

"Drones...They never had drones in my day." Said Kallina. "Whatever next?"

Kallina went to sleep, just like that, in an instant. At first it had worried Luca, but she was now used to it. Nothing to do with her injuries, Charlotte had said Kallina's instant naps were well known. Luca adjusted the flow of fresh blood and sat in a nearby chair.

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Captain Sargsyan had been really helpful; Ruby had expected nothing less. They did have a berth booked at the docks in Mogadishu, though the weather and other factors often added a day to his arrival time. Ruby suspected the other factors meant delivering contraband to out of the way places. The crew had seemed used to dropping anchor in lonely bays. The captain had loaned her a lifeboat sized dinghy, with a man who knew the local waters.

"Wear clothes you don't mind wading in." The captain had told them.

Just her and Charlie and one other, the dinghy was likely to need room to bring back the man and the woman who'd waved at the drone. Spider had come too, to watch their backs while they talked to the two people, who might be wunderkinds. Ruby liked to take Spider when she was meeting people who might not have good intentions. He looked like someone no one would want to mess with. The man steering the boat, put them ashore on a sandy beach, which merged with dunes. The drone had shown them miles of dunes, going a long way inland.

"I'm not keen on trudging through sand." Said Spider. "After a while it begins to feel like wading through treacle."

"The drone had their tent less than a mile from here." Said Ruby.

No roads close by, the maps on the ship had shown there was a road that ran along the coast to Baraawe. Where they were, the road was a good five miles inland. It crossed Ruby's mind that the people they were trying to find, hadn't had an easy job getting where they were. The drone hadn't

spotted any vehicles, but that didn't mean they didn't have one. A drone from the Ajax hurtled past overhead and headed across the dunes.

"Sophie watching over us." Said Charlie.

The sand started off as dry, loose and quite tiring to walk on. As they gained some distance from the ocean, a few grasses had taken route. By the time they spotted the tent, the ground had become quite firm. Dunes can hide many things, even unintentionally. The dune buggy was deep between two dunes and difficult to spot until you were almost on top of it.

"Find somewhere to watch from Spider." Said Ruby. "Just in case Kallina was wrong about them." Spider was at the top of a nearby dune, when Ruby and Charlie were stood in front of the tent. It looked larger than it did in the images sent back by the drone.

"Hello, anyone in there?" Yelled Ruby.

The man was like her, she knew it as soon as he came out of the tent. Ruby had always known there was a chance the moment could arrive; Kallina and Kurt hadn't kept brilliant records. There had always been the chance that a survivor of the human hybrid experiment might turn up, maybe more than one. All those years, wondering why they were so different. Perhaps even being rejected by their people, for being...different. No Kallina to put him in stasis, the man's physical appearance was that of a man in his late thirties. Probably older, with his physical age effectively stopping in early middle age. He looked local, probably born somewhere in Somalia. The woman with him wasn't like her, or the man. She was a normal human.

"I am so pleased to meet you, another like me." Said the man. "I am Abshir Duale and this is my sister by my father's second wife, Calaso. I never intended to bring her, but after I stole the dune buggy.....They might have killed her."

He spoke, but it was Calaso's mind broadcasting the details about them stealing from the town headman and running away. It had all begun when Abshir had sensed the presence out on the ocean, the minds of others with the same gifts he possessed. Calaso looked to be in her mid-twenties and she idolised her half-brother. There never had been any thought of letting him run away without her. They both spoke and thought in English, which didn't surprise Ruby. English had become almost the universal language for refugees, mainly because it was the language of the west. "I'm Ruby, this is Charlotte and the man on the dune with a large rifle, is Spider." Said Ruby. "Collect your things, we have a ship waiting to take us to Mogadishu."

They only had one small bag each and very little in the way of supplies. Ruby realised they'd thrown the dice, accepting that if Ruby hadn't turned up, or refused to take them; they were likely to die on the dunes. Maybe sooner, Sophie was in her head, mentioning vehicles heading their way. Sophie summed it all up by shouting 'Move!' into her mind.

Charlie talked to Abshir as they walked back to the dinghy. She too had always known there was a possibility of finding others like them. Ruby walked with Calaso, with Spider watching the dunes behind them.

"You're very brave, running away with your brother." Said Ruby.

"He needs me, despite being special." Said Calaso. "He's always been alone, apart from me. He didn't know I was watching, but I saw him try to kill himself when I was small. He ran a blade through his own throat. He lived and the wound healed, but he was weak for many months. Has your life been like that?"

"No Calaso, I've been very lucky. My life has been nothing like that."

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For a moment, Eugenie was being pummelled by two small children. They were doing her no real harm, apart from denting her dignity. The longer she took to calm them down, the more time Flex had to wake up and try to escape. Both of them were threatening the terrible things their brother would do to her. The idea that Flex would bring his family to Budapest while he was working, seemed absurd. Eugenie had experienced some weird things, so it wasn't out of the question. "Enough, behave yourselves." She snapped.

Just enough power behind the command to make the two children harmless, without any danger of accidentally lobotomising them. A flash of a special smile and they'd be hers to command, at least for a few hours.

"Sit on the bed.....Stay in this room."

"Yes miss." Said twice.

By the time Jakub came through the door, the kids looked like the picture of polite, well-behaved children. He simply nodded in the direction of the kids.

"I have no real idea; I think they're the brother and sister of Flex." She said.

"Makes sense, we found his parents downstairs."

"Time to talk to Flex." She said.

Eugenie didn't even check to see if the bedroom door was locked. Sending it flying off the hinges was quicker and wonderfully cathartic. Whoever Olga was getting her information from needed to be fired. Nothing was how it was supposed to have been, nothing. By the time she walked into the bedroom, she had half of Jakub's team behind her. They'd lost a friend coming through the front door, another badly wounded. No one was in the mood to put up with any nonsense. Only training and their discipline saved Flex's life. He was knelt on his bed, a handgun aimed straight at her.

"What are you ? What the fuck are you ?" He yelled.

He'd felt her mind in some way and knew she wasn't entirely human. It was rare, but it happened. Once Olga was finished with him, Ruby would probably want to have a talk with Flex. Tempting to use full power and fry his mind, but they needed the information in his head. Eugenie hit him with just enough of her gift to make him submissive.

"Drop the gun.....Now." She said.

He dropped the gun and Jakub was on him, binding wrists and ankles with cable ties.

"Gag him Jakub." She said. "Otherwise, I wouldn't be surprised if he persuades someone to let him go."

Flex was skinny and he was only wearing a pair of boxer shorts. His blonde hair was an unruly mop and taken all together, he didn't look impressive.

"I just hope he's worth all the trouble." Said Jakub.

"So do I." She said. "So do I.....Are any of his guards still alive ?"

"Just the man out of the couple Flex travels with. He won't give us any trouble. He dropped his gun and began crying, the instant the woman was killed."

"Love will do that, Jakub. That leaves us with enough prisoners to make the journey back a bit cramped. We can't take the entire Flex family to Olga's place. Any ideas ?"

"There's a gymnasium Olga is renovating in District XIX." Said Jakub. "I brought the keys, just in case we needed somewhere. Plenty of space, you can interrogate him there."

"I'll let Olga have a crack at him first, just to soften him up." Said Eugenie.

"Poor devil, I wouldn't want to be in his shoes." Said Jakub.

They were shoving Flex into an elderly Mercedes, when he managed to free his mouth from the gag, just a little.

“Don’t hurt my family.”

There was a certain quality to his voice, a natural charisma for want of a better word. The sort of man who could turn up at a town meeting and organise them to tidy up the local dump, or turn them into a howling mob.

“Gag him properly.” Said Eugenie.

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“We should interrogate them.” Said Sophie.

The Ajax was underway again, barely a few hours behind schedule and the captain had promised they’d arrive in Mogadishu when they were expected to berth at the bulk grain area of the docks. Ruby had enough problems on her mind and to be honest, she didn’t view Abshir Duale and his sister Calaso, as a problem. Sophie and Anna were behaving as though the new arrivals should be kept locked up, guilty of something until proven innocent. Ruby was basing her ideas on half an hour’s conversation with Calaso. Maybe not scientific, but she’d seen enough of Calaso’s memories to trust her and by implication, her brother.

“Or at least restrict their movements.” Said Anna. “They might be here to hurt Kallina.”

“Oh, don’t be absurd, Kallina sent me to find them.” Said Ruby.

She’d raised her voice, which she didn’t like to do, or at least not too often. There was no use encouraging her wunderkinds to come up with ideas, if she just shot them down when they did.

“Treat them as family, allow them access to anywhere and everyone.” Said Ruby. “Especially Kallina, she’ll see every memory they have. Abshir might be able to block his thoughts, but Calaso can’t. You have until we reach Mogadishu to delve into their minds. After that and if you find nothing to worry about, they’ll be family. No digging in their minds after they’re family.....Agreed ?”

“Fine.” Said Anna.

“You look in our minds, I’ve felt you.” Said Sophie.

Sophie looked so upset, Ruby had to hug her.

“I’m different and anyway.....I do it for your own good.” Said Ruby.

“Alright, if they seem harmless by the time we get to Mogadishu, they’re family.” Said Sophie.

“Spread the word you two, I want everyone to know.”

Ruby had another agenda. By getting the wunderkinds to know the new additions to the family; Abshir and Calaso would get to know them. All the stories they’d hear, all the history and events in Africa. Soon their new Somali brother and sister would know the history of all the thirteen, even the ones still on other continents. It was far easier than Ruby having to give them a Wunderkind 101 lecture. As for finding out what the new additions could do and what gifts Abshir might have ? That and their future training, could wait until Kallina was fully healed.

“Abshir is rather handsome.”

She heard Sarah say to Sophie. It was beginning, the almost unconscious absorption of the newcomers into the group.

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Olga had bought the building cheap, but the refurbishment looked likely to be a money pit. She was still determined to get the gym open and operating at a profit though. It was going to be one of many such enterprises. Open a gym with a decent bar and restaurant and the customers rolled in. Their friends and family thought they were working off the excess pounds, while they were really eating fine cuisine and drinking expensive wines. Mainly though, it was a damned good way to launder the cash from her other less legal operations. A successful gym could wash clean several

millions in tainted dollars and euros. At the moment though, the inside of the building looked fairly derelict.

"I don't like dealing with families Jakub." She said. "The police won't give a crap about Flex turning up dead somewhere, but if his dear old mum gets so much as a scratch.....No, families are bad news."

"They're all fine, not a bruise on any of them."

"Make sure it stays that way."

"There is the special ops guy. Are we going to disappear him ?" Asked Jakub.

"See if Eugenie can turn him first." Said Olga. "Someone with his skills could be useful."

Olga had to look in the room where Flex's parents and siblings were being kept. They'd been given mattresses to sleep on and enough bottled water to keep them hydrated. She'd already asked Jakub several times and knew they were being fed and allowed regular visits to the bathroom. The room wasn't exactly a five-star hotel, but it was comfortable enough. Flex's mother began to walk towards her, so Olga closed and locked the door.

"Oh, families Jakub.....My own was bad enough." Said Olga.

"What will we do with them ?"

"At the moment I have no idea. Maybe Eugenie can give them a mind wipe ? I'm not sure."

Ruby could do it; Olga was sure of that. No telling when Ruby might return though and even then, she might not do a stopover in Budapest. Olga hated the idea, but she was becoming resigned to the idea of keeping Flex's family comfortable, for quite some time. Eugenie was already there, sat in the room everyone was calling the interrogation room, despite it being where the ladies locker room would be. Olga was a little late, fashionably late as she liked to call it.

"Good morning Eugenie, has he said anything ?"

"No and he's very good at blocking his mind from me. Not his name though, people can rarely hide that. Since being quite small, we're all taught how to write our own name. We go on to use it everywhere. A name is a mental reflex, he's thinking of his now."

"So, who is our guest ?" Asked Olga.

"We have here, Mr Fletcher Xavier Rusinek, AKA Flex."

"Yes, Flex.....I get it now."

Flex hadn't been tied to the chair, a few of her people were really hoping he'd try to escape. One dead capturing him and another with a serious chest wound. There was a lot of animosity towards the man in the chair. Jakub had found him some clothes to wear, jeans and a green long-sleeved shirt. Olga stood in front of Flex, looking down at him. When he tried to stand, she pushed him back down.

"First question Fletcher." She said. "Just me being curious, but why bring your entire family with you to Budapest ?"

"Are they alright ?"

"Yes, one of my guys complains that they eat better than he does. Now, answer the question."

"You know who I am and I have a pretty good idea who you are." Said Flex. "I too seem to have made an enemy of Gallaan Industries. I know how they operate. Gallaan have left a body count in their wake, larger than a Mexican drug cartel. As I have only a small number of people I trust, it's easier to protect my family, if they travel with me."

"And there's nothing quite like a shared enemy, for forging unlikely alliances." Said Eugenie.

"Yes, I'll tell you anything you want to know about Gallaan and the late Julius Sima."

"Just one thing, before we all get too cosy." Said Olga.

Olga was thin, but she was also tall. There was more weight behind her punches than most people imagined, and she'd been taught hand to hand fighting in the military. Her training had been in her twenties, reinforced by a hell of a lot of real-world experience. When she punched Flex in the face, he went right back in the chair. She pulled him forward by his shirt and hit him again.

"One of my people dead, another in hospital." She said. "We're still not even, but I'm willing to leave it at that."

Olga was happy, the left side of his face looked bad, it'd be one huge purple bruise by morning. Flex had his fingers in his mouth.

"Damn, I think you're busted my teeth." He said.

"If I have, I'll get my dentist to fix them." Said Olga.

His fingers came out of his mouth bloody, so she probably had left him needing dental work.

"Olga had her curiosity question and I have mine." Said Eugenie. "I can understand leaving a trap in the mind of Julius Sima. Anyone gets too close to making him reveal a secret, and he dies. I get that, but not why Caleb Friedman is alive and well. Not to be unkind, but the guy is an arsehole. He knows too much from stealing data he was never meant to see. So, why didn't Gallaan kill him.....Why didn't you?"

Flex was still picking at his teeth with bloody fingers, but he was laughing. Olga didn't have any mind reading skills, yet the laughter looked genuine.

"Oh, why is Caleb Friedman still alive? You're not the first to wonder about that." Said Flex. "He's become the subject of a weird conspiracy to keep him alive. Not just Gallaan, there are a few security services and police departments involved. I've also heard a few large corporate conglomerates have issued a hands-off notification on him."

"But.....Why?" Asked Eugenie.

"There was an idea that he knew something, a huge secret. The idea became a rumour, which became a full-blown conspiracy theory. I changed a few of his memories, but it took hours of using drugs and hypnotic suggestion. Someone better than me has added fake memories. His mind is a patchwork of the real, the fake and the downright weird. He has a traumatic memory of the death of his childhood sweetheart, which never happened. Someone got the idea that in that patchwork of nonsense, is a memory worth a fortune. Big money, maybe billions. So, he's the subject of a keep him alive conspiracy. Oddly, he doesn't seem to realise he's untouchable."

"That all makes dreadful sense." Said Eugenie. "Do you think he really does have a billion-dollar secret in his head?"

"He might have, he was a data courier for some cutting-edge weapons companies."

"So, we're all friends now, that's great." Said Olga. "We'd all love to know Caleb's secret, though we know it all might be crap. What I've been asked to do is find a way of dealing with Gallaan. Nothing too extreme, just some way of making them harmless, at least for a while. Any ideas Flex?"

He was still prodding at something in his jaw, though he no longer looked scared of her.

"I can think of a few ways to slow them down to a crawl, maybe even put them out of the game for a while. I want to see my family first though. If they're unharmed and being looked after, I'll help you as best I can."

Olga looked at her watch and the timing was perfect. Jakub should have just sent someone out for coffee and doughnuts. There was one thing to check though, before Flex got a little quality time with his family.

"How about it Eugenie, can he help us, or is he full of crap?" She asked.

“Hmmm, he’s blocking me by part of his mind imagining he’s at a Dua Lipa concert. It’s surprisingly effective at blocking details. He does believe his plan will work against Gallaan and parts of the plan requires a violent solution. That’s all I can see.”

“Sounds just our sort of thing.....Alright Flex, I’ll give you half an hour to make sure Family Rusinek are being looked after. You should even get coffee and a doughnut. Then I expect your complete cooperation.”

“You will get it.”

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Todd had been surprised when Nazili had agreed to come over to the flat he shared with Ruby. It did make things easier; Todd hadn’t fancied putting the assault rifle and grenade launcher in the back of a hired van. Accidents happened and then he’d have been filling in forms for the MOD until he retired. Being special ops gained a lot of leeway from petty rules, but taking the toys home....That was still a huge no-no.

Everything was laid out on the sofa ready to be picked up, when Nazili was ready to send him to the ship, the Ajax. His hand was trembling slightly, it was his first time. He’d seen some strange and amazing things in Africa, but it was his first time for being instantly zapped, halfway around the globe. Constanze was already downstairs, being looked after by Angie in flat 1. Todd jumped a little when the entry phone warbled at him.

“Idiot, relax you damn fool.” He muttered at himself.

Monique was with Nazili; she’d answered when he’d said hello. She seemed to view herself as not only Nazili’s lover, but also an interpreter of his geekdom when it was required. Several times she’d dealt with troublesome people who’d asked too many questions about the man covered head to foot, who was over seven feet tall. Generally though, Nazili was accepted as just another inhabitant of the London melting pot. Todd had the door open, just as they arrived at the last set of steps.

“Thank you Nazili, this means a lot to me.” Said Todd.

“Did you give the cat to the neighbour ?” Asked Monique.

“Yes, Constanze will be fine.”

Army training, years of having his living space inspected. Todd had cleaned out the fridge, washed the dishes and would leave the flat spotlessly clean. Nazili walked over to the window and looked up into the sky.

“I’m sending you there a bit earlier than I intended.” Said Nazili. “I have a feeling Todd, nothing more than that. Might be nothing, but sending you a little early can’t hurt.”

“Are you coming with me ?” Asked Todd.

“No and I won’t be bringing you back. Once you’re there, you’re with them until Ruby decides to return home.”

Nazili had an unusual relationship with time. Todd had heard the Arbiter say things in Africa that hadn’t made sense, until later. Having no way home might be a problem, his real job might think he’d gone AWOL. Monique muttered at Nazili, who mumbled back at her.

“Five minutes, Sophie is expecting you.” She said.

“I told her not to say anything.” Added Nazili. “Just in case you wanted to surprise Ruby.”

“Thank you, that’s nice.” Said Todd. “I just hope Ruby is pleased to see me.”

“Pick up whatever you’re taking.....By the time I get you in the right position, it’ll be time to send you to the ship.” Said Nazili. “I’m going to use Sophie as the focus point.”

Two bags and a heavy weapon over both shoulders. Todd was used to carrying a fair amount, all soldiers trained with backpacks full of bricks. Nazili fussing wasn't fun, as the Arbiter prodded him to move left or right, by tiny amounts.

"Don't want you hitting the energy wall."

Only Monique smiling at every comment, kept him relaxed. Eventually he seemed to be within a fraction of a millimetre to the position acceptable to Nazili.

"You need to keep completely still."

"Don't worry, I've travelled this way a few times, and I'm still here." Added Monique.

Nazili looked up the ceiling, then down at the floor. All the time he was muttering to himself and making strange six fingered hand gestured. Todd became surrounded by a curtain, of what looked like lightning. Probably electrical, the cheap amalgam fillings in his teeth were aching. There was a loud noise too, like an MRI machine on its last legs. At the point when he was getting fed up with the crackles, the aching teeth and the noise. The electrical curtain vanished. He was in what looked like a cabin on a ship, there were two portholes in the wall. Then Sophie was cuddling him and he dropped everything to hug her.

"Oh Todd, it's so nice to see you. Ruby will be so happy you're here."

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