

Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

Chapter 20 - Kaluga

“Spider left with Sarah, heading in the direction of the Kremlin. It was somewhere he’d always wanted to see, something to tick off his bucket list.”

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Caleb Friedman hadn’t thought about the supposed billion-dollar secret in his head, for quite some time. He now knew at least half of his memories were false, including the horrific deaths of a few family members. Charlotte had stopped delving into his mind, supposedly because there’d be more time for such things, after they’d settled matters in Norway. Caleb was no mind reader, but he knew Charlie well enough to spot a lie. A well-meaning lie, but still a lie. Not just Charlie, they were all sure he’d go crazy if they pulled the fabric of his memories apart. Sophie had almost told him as much. He’d be alright though; he knew he would. Caleb had already come to terms with definitely not being a product of his life’s experiences. How could he be, when most of them were fake ? He’d decided to be whatever he was, to live for the now.

Would he remain as the new witchcraft improved version of himself, or revert to the old self-obsessed narcissist version ? He hadn’t quite made his mind up. It was nice to be a little more popular and being trusted had its pluses. It was just that he didn’t quite feel right all the time, as though he was acting a part. A friend of his had come off antidepressant for the same reason, he hadn’t felt like his real self. Caleb hoped he got used to being his Kallina altered persona, but if he didn’t.....He’d go back to being a borderline sociopath.

‘This is your pilot.....We’ll be landing at Grabtsevo airport in fifteen minutes.’

Less detail, but also less sarcastic waffle. Ruby had obviously had a talk to the pilots. Where was Grabtsevo airport ? Caleb was quite impressed, Ruby had arranged to land at an airport with a runway large enough to land the Antonov, but he’d never heard of it. That was rare, though a few of McGill’s people were muttering about Russia and Moscow.

“We’ll be training with the new weapons in Kaluga, so get used to the idea.” Said McGill. “I don’t expect any of you will mind shopping in Moscow, with a bundle of Euros in your pocket.”

“I know I wouldn’t.” Muttered Sarah.

The Antonov was large, but they were all in the same cargo hold. A few partitions had been created, but generally; what was said at one end, could be heard by everyone. Soon everyone knew they were about to land in a city, about ninety miles from Moscow. Some were wildly enthusiastic, while a small number looked quite upset by the idea of training in Russia. Most seemed unconcerned. As Spider put it; I’ll happily train anywhere Ruby wants to land.

“Who does Ruby know in Moscow ?” Asked Luca. “I mean, they must have a lot of clout to arrange this.”

“It’s Olga’s brother, he knows people.” Said Charlotte.

Judging by the general look of surprise, it was obvious that Olga’s brother wasn’t one of Ruby’s usual assortment of super kids and ex-military types. Caleb had spent some time at Olga’s mansion and there had been no mention of her family in Russia.

“What brother ? Olga doesn’t have a brother.” Said Delmar.

“They don’t get on.” Said Charlotte. “She once had a serious fight with him, both of them were injured. I guess blood really is thicker than water. Olga obviously agreed to ask him for a favour.”
“A huge favour.” Added McGill.

“Oh brothers, they can be a real nuisance.” Said Cal.

“Hey, I’m stood right here.” Said Abe.

Cal and Abe began a friendly tussle, with lots of giggling and pretending to be annoyed with one another. There came a moment, when Abe smiled at Cal, the way his own sister had smiled at him. Only there hadn’t been a sister in Caleb’s life.....Or had there ? Like hiding a tree in a forest, there had been so many fake memories of a sister. So many that she was tall in some and a tiny svelte, delicate child in others. The truth hit him, at the same time as he knew the secret hidden in his head. ‘We’re about to turn on our approach for Kaluga. Those who wish to, should get strapped in.’

Caleb sat cross legged on the floor and ignored the chaos around him, the usual chaos associated with landing. He had a sister, or there had been a sister once. Definitely a tiny child, with brown eyes and a wicked grin. Svelte to the point where their mother had been concerned about her having an eating disorder. With that memory, many others returned.

“Are you alright, Caleb ?” Asked Charlotte.

The deep secret was there and once it entered his conscious mind, Caleb was fixated on it. Not an impressive secret really, though he could see why it was important. It was the other memories that confused his mind, leaving him catatonic. The others moved around him, but Caleb’s mind needed time to re-order and re-organise, a lifetime’s memories.

“Oh dear, I’m feeling a lot of disorder in his head.” Said Sophie.

“I knew this would happen.” Said Charlotte.

Caleb was in the way, part of him was still able to realise that. Sophie organised it, enough of McGill’s marauders to carry him to the front of the cargo bay. A pillow for his head and then Charlotte covered him in a blanket.

“We’ll need to get Ruby to look at him.” Said Sophie.

“Yes, but Caleb’s safe where he is.” Said Charlotte. “He’s not in anyone’s way.”

Caleb drifted deeper into his own mind and he was happier than he’d been for years. He knew who he was now, his true memories began to piece together the real Caleb Friedman. He felt like a tiny creature, hiding in the darkness of his own mind. Right in front of him was the secret people had died to protect. It was like a slogan spray painted on a wall by a graffiti artist. He was going to look at it, until he remembered it, really remembered it.

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Elio Fulci had no idea where they’d taken him. Some kind of junk yard east of Slovenia, but not that far east. Hungary probably, or maybe Serbia. A junk yard with two portacabin offices, where he’d been introduced to the man Niko called the colonel. No one seemed to like him anymore and the colonel seemed to genuinely hate him. Lots of screaming insults in Russian, much of which Elio didn’t understand. No tying him to a chair and beating him, the colonel’s men were more basic than that. Elio had been stripped naked and kicked around like a football, when Niko wasn’t hitting him with a baseball bat. They’d kept hitting him, long after he’d told them everything he knew, which wasn’t much.

“Sorry Elio, it wasn’t personal.” Said Niko. “The colonel has been recalled over the missing shipment and we both know what that means.”

“Fuck the colonel.” Said Elio.

He thought the words were understandable, but his mouth was so swollen. He'd given them a name he really hadn't wanted to give them for free. He'd insisted on telling them once he was untied, dressed and given a car. Elio had given up Maya Mizrahi after the baseball bat had cracked two of his ribs.

"You were right to talk." Said Niko. "No point in suffering all that pain. We know this bitch Mizrahi, she once worked for the CIA. She'd have given you up in a heartbeat."

"Just let me go."

"Sorry, I can't do that. You'll be our guest, until we've checked out what you told us."

Elio wasn't a young man, but he'd tried to keep in shape. It was still humiliating to be carried naked, by three of the colonel's men. That was all part of the interrogation of course, nakedness took control from him and gave it to those who were beating him. Niko opened the door to a shed. Not a big shed, it looked like the one his gardener used to store the lawn mower and a few garden tools.

"Gets cold here at nights." Said Niko. "You should get dressed as soon as you can."

They dropped him on the floor, before dumping his clothes next to the door. Not much light, just one tiny window and that had a few pieces of wood nailed across it. The bucket lavatory was in one corner, but at least it had a lid. There was a rusty metal bed frame, with a filthy mattress. One folded up blanket and that was thin and grubby. There had been other guests using the accommodation, the mattress had quite a few blood stains.

"Fuck." He muttered.

Niko had been right, getting dressed was essential. It was already cold and the blanket wasn't going to stop him dying of exposure. They were going to kill him anyway. If he'd told them lies the beatings would begin again. Once they'd discovered Maya and knew he'd told the truth....There was no need to keep him alive.

"Socks first." Elio muttered.

He nearly passed out from the pain in his left side, but he got the socks on his feet. Elio then reached for something that would be a real challenge. The boxer shorts would need him to raise his backside up off the wooden floor. He did pass out from pain, but only for a second or two. Getting fully dressed would take a while, but Elio didn't have anything else to do.

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Ruby had only met Olga's brother twice, three times at the most. The last time she'd met Alexander was several years ago and she had no idea what he might look like. Still using the name Alexander, or so she'd been told.

"He calls himself Alexander Bojan Golitsyn." Olga had told her. "There has to be a middle name, it's part of Russian culture. His close friends will refer to him as Alexander Bojan. The middle name is invented, as is the surname."

One of Foxy's people seemed to think the name Golitsyn was because of a famous Russian admiral in the eighteenth century. Alexander had been and probably still was, someone interested in military history.

"Oh, a few of them are wearing medals." Said Todd.

"At least they look friendly." She said.

There were a few armed guards, but Ruby wasn't picking up any hostile vibes. A whole line of senior people from the Russian military were there to meet them. As Todd had noticed, a few of the older men were wearing a chest full of medals. It was all strangely intimidating. Only one woman and she was stood next to the man, who Ruby thought was likely to be Alexander. Tall and athletic looking, with a bit of a glint in his eyes. A moment with Olga came back to her, when she and Olga had been

couriers for whatever crap Jurgis wanted moving around Europe. They were in Russia for a night, a small town not that far from St Petersburg. A cold night, they'd accepted an invitation to stay the night, from the people they'd just delivered to. Two young men, about the same age as themselves. She'd had the conversation with Olga, while they'd been on their own.

"Well Ruby, which one do you fancy?" Olga had asked.

"Neither..... Jurgis and I have enough fights already. We don't need any more causes for friction. He'd come here and kill someone if he found out, I know it."

Ruby was tempted, the man called Lars was obviously interested. A cold night watching TV and drinking local beer. Add on a little casual sex and it'd be the perfect night away from home. There really was no way Jurgis would ever find out. Of course, Olga had to ruin things.

"Probably for the best, Lars reminds me of my brother."

"What's wrong with your brother?" Ruby had asked.

Of course, she had to ask. Ruby could now let sleeping dogs lie. A skill she'd gained, by a few years of seeing the grief caused by waking them up. Then though.....Well, she'd been a lot younger.

"I know these Russian lads, Ruby." Said Olga. "Ask them what they'd be doing, if they weren't gangsters and most say they'd be working for the KGB. It's a sort of joke, one that doesn't say much for the KGB. A few would say they'd be running the KGB. Those are the ones with real ambition and my brother is like that. Alexander is a zealot for the cause, and you should never trust a zealot, ever. I see that in your Lars, he's another zealot."

"He's not my Lars." Ruby had snapped.

Ruby hadn't been lonely, but she'd have probably ended up sleeping with Lars. She'd asked him what he'd be doing to earn a living, if he wasn't a gangster.

"I'd be running the KGB of course."

She hadn't slept with him after that. Olga was right, go for a pragmatist and never trust a zealot. Yet there in front of her was Alexander Bojan Golitsyn, Olga's brother. A believer still in the cause, though which cause wasn't always clear, according to Olga. The ultimate military zealot and like it or not, she had to find a way of working with him. Unsure if she was supposed to work her way along the line of waiting men in uniform, she grabbed Todd and walked towards Alexander.

"Hi Alex, you're taller than I remember." Said Ruby.

"And you dear Ruby, have an Antonov of your own. Last time we met, you were flying kites with Olga."

"The plane is only on loan." She said.

"Never, ever.....Admit that." Said Alex.

They hugged and Ruby introduced Todd. Ruby had files, Foxy had files and it seemed the Russian military had files. Alex knew as much about Todd as she did, maybe more when it came to his military service. It seemed their paths had crossed once, in Syria. They'd come close to exchanging fire that day, but could laugh about it now.

"So, which part of the services are you with now?" Asked Todd.

"The Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, though it's still known as the GRU. So, secret these days, that even my rank is classified. Here, let me introduce you to those assigned to help with your.....Mission."

An entire row of senior military people, all there to help her. Ruby let her mind look into each of them, as she was introduced. Sincerity was the main thing, none of it was for show. Russia had learned a lot about Ishel and her rogues and it worried them. Add on a growing distrust of the Gallan Corporation and for the moment at least, everyone wanted to help Ruby and her

wunderkinds. By the end of the row, Ruby realised the only woman among them hadn't been introduced. No need to delve into her mind. She was involved with Alexander, sexually involved. Their body language was screaming it.

"This is Viktoria." Said Alex. "Viktoria Darya Kabaeva to be exact. Viktoria has trained with the Spetsnaz and will be coming with us to Norway."

"Good.....Good." Said Ruby.

Ruby shook hands with Viktoria, a tall dark-haired woman with the same look as Olga about her, the demeanour of a warrior. There had been no mention of Alexander going to Norway with her, not at first. She'd needed reinforcements though and the Russians had offered. A full squad of battle-ready Spetsnaz might make all the difference, when they faced Ishel and her rogues. The main problem was going to be shoehorning them and their equipment, into the Antonov.

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Maya Mizrahi was supposed to have been in Turkey, but there had been a family problem. Most of her family were the normal, fairly boring people, that make up most families. Maya quite liked boring, it didn't tend to spoil her day or fill her diary with missed appointments. There was her brother though, younger than her by two years. Her brother was an arsehole.

"I'm supposed to be somewhere else." Said Maya. "Your crap is going to cost me money, Ben."

A café in Milan, not far from the hotel where she was staying. Ben was looking repentant, as he usually did when he needed cash. Maya had long ago stopped staying with her brother while in Milan. His apartment was clean, but she'd once found dealer quantities of drugs in the bathroom. "I need the fifty thousand by Friday." Said Ben. "You know how Angelo gets if he's paid late. Two weeks overdue with my money.....He'll break my legs."

Angelo was the local equal opportunities mobster. Everything from drugs and gambling, to at least three online escort agencies. Maya had no idea why her brother seemed to constantly owe huge sums to the mobster and she didn't want to know. He'd once turned up to a family get together, with two hookers on his arm. She loved her brother, but he really was a twenty-two-carat arsehole. "How is this different to the last dozen times Angelo was going to break your legs?" She asked. "It seems to me that you should have runs out of arms and legs to break, years ago."

"Don't give me a hard time, the deal should have left me with a decent profit. You know how it can go though, I got screwed."

Maya knew how it could go; she'd been ripped off a few times. She learned from life though, but her brother never seemed to learn. She'd give him the money though.

"Alright.....I know you'll never change." She said. "Come to my hotel tonight and I'll have the money. Is it worth me giving you the famous, this is the last time speech?"

"You can if you like, I deserve it."

There was nothing truly bad about her brother, apart from her parents spoiling him for most of his life. Maya finished her coffee and croissant, while glaring at her brother. He did have the decency to keep quiet and avoid her gaze.

"I have things to do today. Come to my hotel after eight tonight."

Ben just nodded at her. She'd never kept a list, but her brother had probably cost her close to half a million Euros, one way or another. There had been a promise to her now dead mother though, to look after Ben and make sure he didn't starve.

"If only he wasn't such an arsehole." She muttered.

Maya had been with the CIA; it hadn't just been a rumour. No spy school or anything like that, though there had been some weekend training. She was proficient with handguns, though she

wasn't carrying one. Good with a blade and her instructor had called her a natural in hand-to-hand combat. As for street skills, she'd picked those up really fast. It was all useful, as she seemed to have at least two people following her, one male, one female.

"Who the hell are they?" She mumbled.

She knew Milan, it had once been the city she called home. A risky run across the Via Rembrandt, then into a restaurant she knew had a back door. Out into an alley, before cutting back to Via Roald Amundsen. Another quick run, she'd once been a long-distance runner at high school. Thankfully, she'd decided to wear trainers to see Ben. A left turn into Via Mario Morgantini and Maya began to saunter, as though she was just another tourist. They were good, whoever they were. By the time she reached the next junction, they were behind her again.

"Fuck....Who have I upset?" She muttered.

They knew she'd made them, yet they didn't care. It wasn't about knowing where she went and who she saw, they were trying to scare her. It crossed her mind that it could all end up with a bullet in the back of her head. Her list of enemies was a long one, she'd pissed off a lot of people over the years. Maya crossed the street and entered Bar Paradise. She needed time to think and they were unlikely to try anything in anywhere that public. She ordered a coffee and of course, the man serving knew her.

"Maya.....It's been years."

"Just in town to see my brother."

"Yeah....He comes in here sometimes."

She had no idea who the man was, probably someone from her school days. Her brother had a reputation and after giving her a frothy coffee, the man left her alone. She needed to ask a question though, a weird question, but the best way was to come right out with it.

"Is the door near the ladies' toilets still left unlocked?"

"Yeah, it's where I go for a cigarette break."

The back door would take her into an alley, which ended up at an Alfa Romeo dealership. Unless things had changed since she'd last been in Milan, from there she could vanish into a huge maze of alleys and tiny businesses. Unless those following her had an SUV full of help, she could lose them in that maze. The man whose name still refused to come out of her memory, gave her a plateful of nibbles, without being asked or expecting payment. There were advantages about coming home.

"Do you still keep in touch with Trudy?" He asked.

"No, she moved to Amsterdam to live with her boyfriend."

"How about a refill for the coffee?"

Another few minutes and he'd get flirty. A minute after that and he'd ask her for a date. It was time to leave and hope they'd given up on following her, at least for today.

"No, but thanks.....I need to go." She said.

Past the toilets and after pressing the emergency exit bar, the back door opened. Maya could just about see the sign for the Alfa Romeo dealers. A full two minutes examining what she could see and there was just one teenager, kicking a ball against a wall. She took it gently; nothing makes people more curious than someone running for no apparent reason. Through the side door of the Alfa Dealer's workshop and a quick wave at Tony, a guy she did remember.

"Maya.....I had no idea you were back in town."

"I'm taking a shortcut, Tony. I will call you though, I promise."

Tony had come over to fix her Alfetta one Saturday morning and had left sometime Sunday evening. There had been a few dates after that, but he was another old friend she'd never kept in touch with.

Maya left through the front door of the dealership, before cutting through an alley heading north, towards the dentist she'd used right through her teens. Out of nowhere he was there in front of her, the man who'd been following her.

"Don't.....Run." He said. "We just want to talk to you."

"You could have called."

"This needs to be face to face. The shipment to Slovenia never reached its final destination."

Crap, she'd had a bad feeling about that deal. Maya walked towards the man, as if agreeing to go with him. She waited until just the right moment, before hitting him. A good solid punch to the throat, quickly followed by two more. He went down and would be lying on the ground choking, for quite some time. Her CIA instructor had said some people died from multiple hard blows to their throat. Still, better him than her. Maya ran as fast as she could.

From behind a van, the woman appeared, running at her. Maya tried to make it through a back door to a shop, but it wouldn't open. A blow to the side of her head sent her crashing into a wall, but she was still conscious.

"Bitch !" Yelled the woman.

Maya knew she was good in a fight. Maybe not as fit as she'd once been, but as long as it was all over in a few minutes, she could take the woman. She was also ambidextrous in a fight, her left hand hitting as hard as her right. As her opponent moved in, Maya punched her hard. A left hook that caught her jaw just right. Maya had two rings on her left hand, right up near her knuckles. By the splash of red, she'd probably lacerate the woman's cheek and loosened a few teeth.

"You're the bitch." She shrieked.

Her opponent was hers to finish off, as Maya spun to deliver a knockout blow. The woman wasn't there though. She had to be bleeding and in pain, there was even blood on the pavement. It was impossible, but her opponent had vanished.

Maya didn't really feel the blow on the back of her head, it was over too fast and she was instantly unconscious. She woke up on a sofa in the room with a very solid looking door. Probably a locked door, but she didn't feel awake enough to get up and try to open it. A sink at one end of the room, with a bucket in the far corner. Maya had never been in prison, but she recognised a cell when she saw it. The men came for her an hour later.

"No more fighting, or we'll beat the crap out of you.....Understand ?"

An accent that could have been from anywhere in Eastern Europe, though told to guess, she'd have gone for Serbia.

"I promise to be good." She said.

They put her in a chair in front of a small table. There were pictures of her on the table, mainly meeting various people, with a few taken when she was alone. Worryingly, some seemed to have been taken inside her home. Had they planted cameras ? In the centre of the table was a picture of her drinking coffee, with the guy from Gallaan Industries.

"So, you're awake ?"

Heading for the wrong side of middle age, the man had to be Russian. It wasn't just the Moscow accent; it was the way he looked. Maya had noticed that all Russian men of that period, have a look of Leonid Brezhnev about them. He pulled over a chair and prodded at the picture with his finger, the one in the centre of the table.

"No use saying you don't know Elio Fulci." Said the man. "You seem very good friends."

"That's a buyer from Gallaan Industries." She said.

A loud bell was clanging in her head, a bell only she could hear. Someone had played her; she knew it with a dreadful certainty. The man with Brezhnev looks was still prodding the picture.

“Where are my weapons Maya, what have you done with them ?”

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Nick Teems had been head of security for Gallaan for four years. Not a huge amount of time, but his predecessor had only lasted six months. It was a tough job, where he was frequently asked to do things a drug cartel would think twice about. Before Gallaan, he'd been with the US military since college. It was all he knew and he was good at it. Sometimes he worried about the legality of some actions, but Gallaan paid him well. His wife was happy, assuming he had a desk job.

“I no longer have to worry about the phone ringing, when I have no idea where the army sent you.” His wasn't a sedentary job though, he rarely got to shine a chair with his backside. He was currently staying at a hotel in Tromsø, Norway. He was building a team, spreading operatives among hotels in Tromsø and a few nearby towns. Not an ideal way to do it, but time was becoming a factor.

“I'm glad you came Einar.” Said Nick. “I can understand you wanting to keep well away, but the information in your head will be of enormous help.”

Nick had rented a room above a local burger restaurant. Again, not ideal, but better than having meetings in his hotel room. Einar was eating a burger, the smell from below was irresistible. They'd probably all gain a few pounds before the operation began.

“To be honest, the money was too good to turn down.” Said Einar. “Did you sign up Lena ? She said never again after seeing, what she saw. Then again, I said never again too.”

Nick wondered if he'd have been in Norway, if Gallaan weren't paying him the kind of salary the CEO of a fortune five hundred company would be lucky to get. The trick of course, was surviving and staying out of jail, so he could enjoy the lifestyle.

“Lena is staying at a hotel on the far side of the city. Yes, she did say no, until my boss called her and assured her, she'd be nowhere near the front line. I'm expecting her to join us.”

“So, there is a front line ?” Asked Einar.

“I think we should wait for Lena to arrive.”

There was a coffee machine in the room, so Nick poured himself a refill. At the back of his mind was a worry that Lena was on a plane back to wherever she currently called home. Rumour had it that she was living with Einar. It was a relief when she walked through the door, munching at a bag of fries.

“Oh wow, every office should have a burger joint.” Said Lena. “We're all going to be huge if we spend too much time here.”

“Tell me about it.” Said Nick.

Coffee for everyone, of course. It gave Nick time to think through what he was going to tell them. The truth, he'd decided that while on the plane from Paris. They deserved to know the facts and besides, they there both going back to the island. He just had to work out how much money would get them to pick up an assault rifle again.

“Alright, Einar was asking about a front line.” Said Nick. “The authorities have evacuated the island, citing attacks by some kind of wild animal. Brown beers are being hinted at, though even the police aren't taking that seriously. An investigation campsite has been erected near the airstrip at Skagen. That was probably done purely for PR. Can't have anything eating the tourists.”

“I kept looking at the TV news.” Said Lena. “I expected them to be bombing the island by now.”

“We've seen what these things can do.” Said Einar. “The Norwegian authorities haven't a clue what's really going on.”

"He's right." Said Nick.

Nick had a file, mainly full of pictures. Some were quite disturbing, including detailed photographs of the Gallaan operatives who'd been ripped apart. Einar could handle it, but he wasn't sure about Lena. She had nearly died from her wounds. He pulled out a few pictures from the file and placed them on the table.

"Is this what attacked you?" Asked Nick.

"I just saw them quickly, in the dark." Said Einar. "Where did you get the pictures?"

"I have my sources and everywhere leaks, everywhere. These are pictures of a creature killed while attacking a British security services base near London. I have the dissection report if you're interested?"

"That's it, that's one of them." Said Lena. "It was fairly dark, but someone used a flashlight for a few moments. It was them; these fucking things ripped our people apart. I watched....I saw them do it."

Nick had another picture, taken by a team following those close to Ruby. Todd had gone to the apartment where one of Ruby's group lived. Also living there was the creature in the picture. The name Nazili had been used, though it was unclear if there was another name to go with it. He threw the picture onto the table.

"They're living here, these monsters." Said Nick. "This one is in London. It goes shopping and even the local pub. A male, who puts on a large floppy coat and just about passes for human. Aliens really are among us."

"They need to be stopped." Said Lena.

"I agree, this one lives with a young woman." Said Nick. "Our surveillance people say they're a couple. So far, we have no idea what Nazili is doing in London."

"Crap, maybe they intend to breed with our women." Said Einar.

"You have to destroy them." Added Lena.

Tempting to try and get Lena back on the team then and there. Nick knew though, that eventually she'd insist on being part of the ground team.

"We will and we're going in hard." Said Nick. "Just about every ex-special forces personnel Gallaan could hire. Weapons we know work against these creatures and if we run into heavy resistance.....We have planes capable of dropping napalm."

"Fuck....You mean business this time." Said Einar.

"We do....Let me run through the plan in detail." Said Nick.

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Spider had quite liked the idea of an evening in Moscow. Then everyone had wanted to go, despite it being ninety miles away from Kaluga. In a way Olga's brother hadn't helped. He'd arranged for a military bus of all things, complete with a driver and someone who spoke perfect English. Actually, Vanina spoke better English than he probably did. Caleb was still in a coma, though Ruby didn't like that word. His mind had turned in on itself and Kallina was remaining in the Antonov to look after him.

"Vanina will be useful, someone to ease the wheels, if any of you attract the attention of the police." As Alex had put it. Once there was a bus parked next to the Antonov, just about everyone and their dog had wanted to go to Moscow for some fun. A fun evening with Sarah and one or two others, had become a crowd. Even Cal was being allowed off base to join them.

"She's learned her lesson." Ruby had told him. "Keep an eye on her though, I know I can rely on you."

Wonderful, he'd become a babysitter for the night. Despite all his misgivings, his mind altered when the bus entered the centre of the city. In many ways, Moscow resembled the cities of the west, right down to adverts for Cola and fast-food joints on every corner. The bus dropped them off at a large car park in the Kuzminki District, about a mile away from the Kremlin. The driver gave them all a piece of paper with the address where the bus was parked, written in English, German and of course, Russian. They obviously weren't the first group of foreigners he'd taken into the capital. "The bus will leave Moscow at midnight." Said Vanina. "Don't be late, the police are very strict about vagrants sleeping in the parks."

"I know, I was arrested for that in Vladivostok." Said Ruby.

General laughter and quite a few jokes about the strange places where some of them had slept, usually out of necessity. Spider left with Sarah, heading in the direction of the Kremlin. It was somewhere he'd always wanted to see, something to tick off his bucket list.

"Oh, did you invite everyone to join us?" Asked Sarah.

Spider looked back and everyone was strung out in a line behind them, even the bus driver. People had told him before that he looked like someone who knew where he was going.

"I suppose there's no harm in it." Said Spider. "If we get lost, we'll all be lost together."

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