

Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

Chapter 21 – The Rogues

“Mara had a trainee with her, a newbie in the family. A boy this time, from what had been a prosperous part of the east. Villand had mentioned Belarus, which hadn’t surprised her. Different parts of the world had sent desperate migrants into France at one time or another. Now it seemed to be Eastern Europe sending boys like Vadim.”

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Coming out of it wasn’t gradual. One moment Caleb Friedman was moving memories around in his mind, like some vast puzzle. The next and he was wide awake and looking at a worried female face. “Are you awake ?” She asked.

“I’m not sure.” He said, while grabbing her arm.

“You’re solid, real.....So much wasn’t, real I mean. So yes, I’m awake.”

He’d heard that people with dementia, could remember details of their lives when they were children, yet couldn’t remember what they’d had for breakfast that morning. Caleb knew the face and that a name was in his mind, but he couldn’t get his mind to dredge it out of all those bruised and battered memories. At last, a name came floating to the surface.

“You’re with McGill, I remember now.” Said Caleb. “Spider said you’re alright.....Rosie, you’re Rosie.”

“I am and I got the job of watching you, in case you woke up.”

It was all coming together, he remembered she was from the North of England, somewhere called Newcastle. She helped Caleb sit up and he noticed the cargo hold of the Antonov was full of kit, but empty of people.

“Where is everyone ?” He asked.

“Training, they’ve given us a huge hangar to train in.” Said Rosie. “You should see the way it’s been equipped. I’ve seen Olympic squads with less state-of-the-art equipment.”

“And I’ve caused you to be stuck here.”

“I don’t mind, everyone is worried about you.” Said Rosie.

Ten to one, his personal Florence Nightingale had probably chosen the short straw, though he wasn’t going to mention that. Caleb pushed back the blanket and tried to stand up. His legs refused to cooperate.

“I feel weak as a kitten, how long was I unconscious ?” He asked.

“This is day three.....As I said, everyone is worried.”

“Give me a hand.....Please. I need to get on my feet.” He said. “I have something to tell Ruby, only Ruby.”

She was smiling, though no help in standing up seemed likely.

“I’m not sure I should.” Said Rosie. “Luca was worried you’d wake up dehydrated....She said something else about low blood sugar levels. Best if you wait until she’s seen you.”

“Where is Luca ?” He asked.

“In the hangar, getting a refresher course for her weapon skills.”

The news made him angry, even if it was a sensible way for Luca to spend her time. He was probably her only patient and she’d left someone to look after him. Even if it was unfair, he became increasingly angry.

“So, I’m stuck here until she can be bothered to show up.” He shouted.

Blood pumping as his heart rate probably reached tachycardia levels. Anger had to be adding adrenaline to his blood. Then there was poor Rosie, trying to support him as he lurched to his feet. He was up on his own feet, even if he was still feeling wobbly.

“Sorry, I don’t usually get like that.” He said. “It’s just that I remember now.....I really remember.....Everything.”

“Alright, I’ll help you get to Ruby.” Said Rosie. “She’s in the airport offices. Not that far, about a five-minute walk. Will you be alright for that long on your feet ?”

“Of course, I will be.....I won’t allow myself to fall over.”

“Oh dear, Luca will never trust me again.” Muttered Rosie.

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Eachann looked at his phone before mentioning the word walk, to his dog, Joci. The weather for Mozsgó, his village was cold, but dry. The two previous mornings he’d let Joci out to do his business in the woods behind his house. Not good for his poor dog and not good for him. Eachann wasn’t getting any younger and missing his morning walk, now made his hips ache all day. That part of Hungary had wet winters, but this year had been particularly bad.

“Looks like we’re getting a walk, boy.” He told his dog. “According to the forecast, it’ll be no colder than five degrees today.....Dry too.”

The word walk made Joci go crazy, it always did. His own fault of course, he’d encouraged Joci to do that, when it had seemed cute. Évi had thought it was cute too, until she’d left him. Two sons who’d moved to Budapest and only visited once a year, if he was lucky. A wife who’d run off with a postman and now lived in Pécs. Cities, everyone had gone to live in cities, claiming there were more opportunities. Eachann liked the village and his life with Joci.

“If only it was a bit drier.....Eh boy ?”

Joci had to go on a lead for a walk through the village, he didn’t play well with other dogs. Eachann had become the grumpy old guy of the village with his scrappy dog. He just couldn’t remember exactly when that had happened though, not exactly. He put on his thick outdoor coat and fur hat, which caused Joci to go even crazier.

“Alright, boy.....We’re going out.”

Out of his house and onto the road which went east, through the village. There was a cold wind, which made it feel more like minus five than plus five. They had a regular walk, past the church and then along the side of the river for a while. Not a long walk, probably only just over a mile in total. Then again, Mozsgó was a small village.

Soon they were walking beside the river. Well away from the nearest house, his scrappy dog could come off the lead. Straight away Joci ran off and started barking at something. The damned dog chased everything from squirrels to the occasional fox.

“Joci.” He yelled. “Whatever it is.....Leave it alone.”

One day his dog would pick a fight with a wild boar and that would be the end of him. When he found him, Joci was pulling at something half in and half out of the river.

“What have you found ?” Muttered Eachann.

A body, the naked body of a man. Eachann pulled his dog away and put him back on the lead. He’d seen death before, but never anyone who looked to have been beaten to death. Livid bruising, even a broken leg bone sticking up out of the muscles. Someone had left a message in Russian, which Eachann spoke. A message carved into the dead man’s chest.

‘предатель.’ Traitor.

He stroked his dog, always guaranteed to calm Joci down. There was nothing to identify the dead man, his body was totally naked. Eachann used his phone to call the police, who tended to be just one local man, two if Hagen had managed to get his budget increased.

“Hi Hagen, it’s Eachann..... I’ve found a body by the river. Just about due east from the church.”

There had been a lot more questions and an official interview, once the detectives had arrived from Pécs. No answers to his questions though, the police weren’t telling the villagers anything. Nothing on the TV news either. It seemed a naked dead guy in Mozsgó, wasn’t considered important enough to get a mention, even in the late-night news.

Pécs had a newspaper called The Sun, which everyone in the village bought, or had someone send them. Not all the time, just for that issue which named their body, the one Joci had discovered by the river.

“Hey, you’re famous boy. They even spelt your name right.” Muttered Eachann.

A journalist had visited the village, taking a few pictures and talking to a few people. Joci had tried to bite him, but Joci seemed to view biting strangers as his life’s work. It seemed their body, the whole village had claimed it as theirs. Was a man called Elio Fulci, an Italian. A shipping agent, who it was rumoured, had upset an organised crime family.

“He looks quite respectable in this picture, Joci.”

Being fully clothed helped of course. A smiling man in a smart suit. Probably a copy of the picture his family kept on the mantelpiece, or the sideboard. Eachann would always picture Elio Fulci as a dead man with ‘Traitor,’ carved into his chest. For a while Eachann and his scrappy dog were popular, everyone wanted to hear about them finding the body. It wouldn’t last, but while it did, Eachann was determined to enjoy his fifteen minutes of fame.

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Ishel had been known as Guardian Ishel for centuries. Leader of the rogue Das Geheimnis, the secret people. A name given to them by a German Anthropologist, who’d become convinced an older intelligent species still walked planet Earth. After being with Ruby and her thirteen for a while, Ishel had changed her official title. She was now Mother, their mother, matriarch of all the surviving rogues.

“You need to listen to the council.” Said Tlal. “Organise a quick evacuation and get us away from Norway. Civilians have been killed and although the authorities move slowly, they will eventually find us. Then a war will begin, one we can’t win.”

Tlal had once been just an ordinary fighter, a female sniper of some fame. After showing she had a sharp mind, there had been a series of promotions. Tlal was now leader of the council. Although not a democracy, Ishel did tend to seriously consider the council’s recommendations.

“I’m not convinced the Norwegians are taking the deaths seriously.” Said Ishel. “No military helicopters surveying the island, not even a few boots on the ground. It’s my opinion that the council are being over cautious.”

Ishel wanted to say the council were behaving like a gang of scared children. She needed the council on her side though, they tended to do the day-to-day tasks she despised. Tlal had been around Ruby too long of course, infected by her ideas. Ishel saw that infection in several of her key people. There wasn’t much she could do about it, for now. Eventually the infected would be replaced with those she could trust, completely.

“I believe the Gallaan forces will be back.” Said Tlal. “They know who and what we are. There is strong evidence that they’ve been supplied with weapons that can kill us. Then of course.....There is Ruby Mason.”

“Oh, that name.” Said Ishel. “There was a time I thought she’d be a loyal friend. She swore to never turn on us, but now.....I sense she’s behind a lot of our current problems.”

“She loves the humans.” Said Tlal.

“Yes....She has one in her bed, or so I’ve heard.”

There had been an oath from Ruby, never to attack Ishel or her rogues. For some reason Ruby was now conspiring against her. There had been friction with Max and his fighters in Somalia, but he had chosen to be her enemy. A few minor skirmishes with the British security service. As Ishel thought it all through, she began to understand why Ruby was on her way, with a small army of wunderkinds and human soldiers. Ishel sighed....A long audible sigh.

“I think we can assume Ruby will be visiting old friends, at least for a while.” Said Ishel. “Our paid informants say she’s still in Baku, with no sign of being in a hurry. The Norwegian authorities seem to think brown bears are killing tourists. Tell me, Tlal....Have you seen any bears in the area ?”

“Never, none at all.”

Too easy to think of the Norwegian army as being lazy and stupid. They weren’t and Norway was part of NATO. Any problems and the American might send a few thousand of their soldiers to the island. Ishel pulled up the latest information from her informants in Europol and the CIA. She pondered the options for a few minutes.

“I have decided.....We have three problems to deal with.” Said Ishel. “Ruby is unlikely to be here soon, or she may never arrive. The Norwegians are busy looking for bears. So, we shall use our plan to deal with a major incursion onto the island by Gallaan fighters.”

“We know they’re bringing people into Tromsø.” Said Tlal.

“Yes, filling every hotel and guest house, I’ve heard.” Said Ishel. “We have an existing plan, which can be quickly modified. Our first priority will be to destroy the Gallaan presence in Norway. Not a few deaths, they seem to be hard to discourage.”

“Like cockroaches.”

“Yes, my friend.... Like cockroaches, the only way is to wipe them out, completely.” Said Ishel.

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Ruby was deep into a conversation with Alexander. All about resources and how anything of strategic importance tended to be rationed, in modern Russia. Ruby had already done well in getting what she needed, as Alexander wasn’t slow to remind her.

“One fairly influential admiral has threatened to resign, over what he calls giving supplies to the enemies of the people.” Said Alex.

“Wow, that’s a very pre-perestroika frame of mind.” Said Todd.

“Oh, you should hear a room full of communist era generals.” Said Viktoria. “You’d think the Americans were still blockading Cuba.”

“Bottom line.....Will I get the weapons ?” Asked Ruby.

As she asked the question, her eyes looked out of the administration office window. Caleb was walking slowly towards her, with one of the marauders helping him. The girl called Rosie probably, the one Spider liked. It was good to see Caleb up on his feet. Ruby had almost given up hope of him coming out of what had begun to look like a coma.

“Yes, this time.” Said Alex. “You’ll get everything on the last request, but nothing more. The attitude is that the Russian federation has already given more than we can afford.”

“That’s fine.....We can get the job done.” Said Todd.

“Yes, we won’t waste a bullet.” Said Ruby. “Can it be in the minutes or something, that we do appreciate the help we’ve received.”

"We don't do minutes for meetings, but I'll pass your words on to the angry admiral." Said Viktoria.

"And now, if we're finished? I can see Caleb on his way here." Said Ruby.

"Ahh, the mystery man....Yes, we're finished." Said Alex.

Ruby was outside as Caleb arrived, needing Rosie's help to stay on his feet. Despite looking as though he should have been in a hospital bed, he was grinning from ear to ear.

"I remember, Ruby." Said Caleb.

"He insisted on coming to see you." Said Rosie.

"What do you remember?" Asked Ruby.

"Everything.....Some of it is good, but some of it.....I feel as though I've had my soul held up in front of my face. Not a good thing, Ruby. Definitely not a good thing."

There was a small parade ground behind the office. There were two grubby wooden benches next to it. Not a wonderful place to talk to a sick man on a cold day in Russia, but there'd be privacy. Ruby got Caleb to the bench, where he fell onto the seat, rather than sat.

"It'll be your electrolytes.....They'll be screwed up from three days without food." Said Ruby. "Luca was going to put you on a banana bag drip today, if you didn't wake up."

"Luca mentioned him being dehydrated." Said Rosie. "Oh.....Blood sugar too....His is too low."

"Yes, I'm a medical wreck.....But I have so much to tell you, Ruby." Said Caleb. "All of it private.....Sorry Rosie."

"Fine, I'll make myself scarce."

It was rude, but it saved Ruby the job of telling her to scram. Whatever secret had been lurking in Caleb's head, it had to be kept within Ruby's weird extended family. Once Rosie was well away from them, Ruby could ask the questions she'd wanted answers too for so long.

"So, tell me about the genuine you, the real Caleb Friedman?" She asked.

"We'll there is a sister, a dark haired one, who wasn't killed in an horrific manner.....Look, I can go through all this if you like, but I remember it, the secret that's been in my head for years."

It seemed a lifetime since Flex had told her about adding and removing parts of Caleb's memories and he hadn't been the first to mess with his mind. Ruby was keen on knowing the secret, but Flex had told her anything Caleb remembered was likely to be a fake memory implant. Not that she was going to try and ruin the moment for Caleb.

"Alright.....Tell me the secret?" She asked.

"Bare bones, or the long scenic route?"

"Quick version, for now." Said Ruby.

"I think Kallina's tinkering might have helped, though Cal teasing her brother seemed to be the trigger." Said Caleb. "A few years ago, I had a rare thing, a whole pile of messages from an office in Lisbon, to another office in Lima, Peru. Months of messages creates patterns, which most clients want to avoid. All of it had to be guaranteed eyes only by the recipient. It must have cost them a fortune to send that info, all through a broker of course."

"Any names to go with this?" Asked Ruby.

"Yes, but let me tell it my way." Said Caleb. "I carefully opened most of the packets, like I usually do. No use though, every note was in code and the data was encrypted files on a USB memory stick. I'd given up on finding anything out, but kept opening the jiffy bags out of habit. Someone was careless, mentioning a password in a handwritten note. Might have been a setup, but as you know.....I'm a very curious person."

"I'm guessing you decoded the files on the memory stick." Said Ruby.

“Yes, and not just the one in that packet.” Said Caleb. “People think you can’t copy encrypted files. You can, but the copy is still encrypted, effectively just unreadable crap on your hard drive. I had copies of all the USB drives that I’d delivered to Lima, gigabytes of it. The password on the note, decrypted about a third of them. That was enough to tell me what was going on.”

“Wasn’t this supposed to be the quick version.” Said Ruby.

Caleb was into his memories, judging by the intense look on his face. No smile or polite laugh, he carried on as though she hadn’t spoken.

“Terrorism Ruby, a group you’re sure to have heard of. They talked about the assassination of four senior members of several western governments.” Said Caleb. “Not boasting, they gave dates and names in a very matter of fact way. They’d even killed one nation’s leader, with verifiable info and dates. This is huge.....The operation is still alive and ongoing.”

“I hate to say it, but are you sure the memory you have is genuine ?” She asked.

He leant in, close to her ear. One name, the leader of a western democracy who’d died at the hands of an unknown assassin. Dates, times, those in that nation’s police who’d been paid to oil the wheels. Ruby began to see why so many thought the secret was huge. It was huge, it could topple governments.

“You know the right people, Ruby. Verify a few dates, names and places.”

“I will Caleb, you know I will.” Said Ruby. “I’ll send a request for information to Villand in Paris. He’ll be able to verify a few facts. But we currently have two enemies, Gallaan and the rogues. Once they are dealt with, I was already planning on a holiday to Lima.....I may invite you to join myself and a few trusted friends.”

“You can be certain I’ll accept.” Said Caleb.

“Alright, let’s get you back to your bed, and Luca’s care.”

He seemed alright on the way back to the Antonov, but was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. Luca fussed, muttering about him needing a banana bag drip and a few days of proper meals. Ruby touched his mind for a few seconds and found order, rather than the usual chaos.

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Eugenie had fitted in with Olga’s business empire, perhaps a bit too well. The work on the sting operation against Gallaan, was ongoing, but left her with time on her hands. There were only so many tourist attractions to show Lol, so she’d begun to help Olga in her day-to-day business. Murky waters as just about everything in Olga’s business empire was illegal. The new addition, Nadia, seemed to have no problem dealing with the darker side of Olga’s affairs. It wasn’t that Eugenie was easily led, far from it. It was just that being part of a criminal gang was normal in Olga’s mansion. Plus, though she only ever mentioned it to Lol....She was enjoying the life.

“I have a few things to take to the bank.” Said Nadia. “Please do me a huge favour, Eugenie.”

Nadia was one of those people who was easy to like and impossible to say no to. Olga had loaned her one of her best cars, so Eugenie knew she was dealing with a pro, someone who knew how to get favours out of anyone.

“Alright.....As long as it doesn’t involve working late. Lol got us tickets to the ballet.”

“No, half an hour tops.” Said Nadia. “Call Niccolò in Milan for an update on Maya. The details are in the file on my desk. He’ll give you her movements for the last twenty-four hours.”

Nadia was then gone, on her way to the bank. Or a date with a married man, or maybe just on her way to a late lunch somewhere. Nadia was like that, but she was someone it was hard to stay angry at, or even dislike.

“Ok, let’s get this done.” Eugenie muttered.

The file had notes from Nadia, to herself. One was about flirting with Nicco, because he had good contacts for cheap knock off, designer handbags.

"You are such a player, Nadia." She mumbled.

Eugenie used one of the burner phones, one considered to be safe. The phone number was for First Milan Cosmetics, a wholly owned part of Olga's empire. After being transferred by the reception desk, Eugenie was talking to Nicco. He had an Italian accent that would get many women moistening their panties. Typical; There was no picture in the file now that she wanted to see what he looked like.

"Hi Nicco, Nadia asked me to call you." She said.

"About the bitch I suppose, as she calls her, Maya Mizrahi." Said Nicco.

"That's it, I just need her movements for the last twenty-four hours."

"There was a report on the morning news." Said Nicco. "Maya is dead, her body found in a park by a woman walking her dog."

That was it, the moment Eugenie knew the sting had worked. The Russians now thought Gallaan had ripped them off and they'd responded with their own brand of brutal retribution. It was what they'd been working hard to achieve, but Eugenie couldn't feel happy about Maya dying.

"Nasty business, beaten with several different weapons." Nicco continued. "A plastic bag over her head finished her off, but by then.....I doubt if she knew what was going on."

No agonising about the ends justifying the means. They'd always known there was a strong possibility of Maya being tortured and killed. She'd betrayed several of Olga's associates and caused more than a few deaths. Morality aside, Maya's death was a key indicator that the sting was working as intended. Eugenie went into her efficient professional mode.

"I need a few details, Nicco." She said. "Do you have a contact with the police?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"I'll need everything.....Everything you can get, without putting your contact at risk."

"Will do, call me back in say.....Forty minutes."

Fifteen minutes later, Eugenie found herself still staring at her own writing in the file. Sting assumed successful, shipping agent and cut off both dead. The details from Nicco would be useful, but it was time to tell Olga the good news.

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Spider knew he had a thing about getting older, when he no longer wanted a huge amount of fuss about his birthdays. He'd gone past forty, which Sarah had teased him about for days. That was fine though, she loved him. If he couldn't run quite as fast, or grunted when he got out of a chair, it was all fine. The indoor assault course didn't love him though and neither did Viktoria. She'd appointed herself taskmaster for the assault course and she was taking no prisoners.

"Six minutes is a perfect time." She'd said. "Some of you have been out of the military for a while, so I'll accept seven minutes, eight if you're expertise is in something other than being part of the assault on the island. Everyone completes the course though and if you can't meet the eight-minute requirement, you're off the Antonov and going home."

A small deputation had been to see Ruby, who'd said pretty much the same thing. Ruby had used kinder language, but the basic idea was the same.

"You can have multiple attempts, but you have to complete the course." Ruby had said. "We've all eaten a little too well recently. I'm going to do the course, so if I'm doing it.....Oh, and no getting a friend to time you, it has to be one of the Russian trainers."

Max had completed the course in seven minutes, twenty seconds. Max still looked quite ill, his face still swollen. Even Sarah had mentioned Max having to be in his sixties, yet still able to get a place in the assault team. Spider was currently looking at the eighteen pieces of apparatus, that made up the assault course.

“You can do it; I have faith in you.” Said Sarah.

Sarah was there to cheer him on and offer moral support. Spider really hadn’t wanted her to be there, but realised her presence would make him try harder. The love of his life hadn’t been through the course yet, though he was sure she’d do well. Light and strong, she’d fly up the high climb. He’d been through the course twice. No one timing him, he’d wanted to familiarise himself with the course and spot anything that might give him problems.

“It’s that high climb.....It’s a killer.” He said.

“Remember what Serge used to say.” Said Sarah. “Success at these things is all about confidence. You’ve been through tougher terrain than this, under fire.....An assault course !....You’ll get close to the record.”

The hangar had a high ceiling, someone had joked about seeing a couple of clouds up there. The high climb was obstacle number fifteen, just when you’d want a nice easy coast along to the finish. The usual netting and cross bars to climb up, the damned thing had to be thirty feet high. It wasn’t a game of embarrass the guests from the west. Viktoria had completed the course with them all watching, in six minutes and twenty-five seconds. He kissed Sarah and wondered if Ruby really would send him home, if it came to it. He doubted if she would, but he’d probably be left on the plane with Monique and the other non-combatants. Spider realised that idea felt unbearable.

“Wish me luck.” He said.

Long outdoor assault courses were all about stamina and endurance. Short indoor courses were for fitness training and were all about speed and fitness. Ideal for those with a perfect body mass index. Spider had enjoyed too many Thai meals and beers, to have a decent BMI. All those years in the army had left him still fairly fit. If anyone ran away from him, he usually managed to catch them. Fuck, Viktoria had come to time him. She actually smiled at him.

“When you’re ready Spider.” She said. “I’ll start the timer when you enter the first obstacle.”

At least he didn’t have a pack on his back. Some instructors put a few bricks in the pack, if they were feeling mean. It was indoors, so no wind and rain to worry about. No areas of mud either, that got stuck on your boot and made climbing so fucking hard.

“Easy-peasy.” He muttered to himself.

A plastic tube tunnel first, he was good at those. Out the other end and a small wall with netting to help you clamber over it. Spider had watched others tackle the wall and it was wooden and wobbled. Get it wrong and it could eat up a precious thirty seconds. Hitting the wall high was the way to do it, so it didn’t get a chance to wobble. Spider was over the wall and thinking of the next three obstacles. He’d mentally practised them all, after watching the mistakes of others. He had a rare ability, being able to run on autopilot, while being focused when it mattered.

“Wow, that’s it.....You’re flying, Spider.” He heard Sarah yelling.

By the time he reached the high climb, Spider wasn’t even breathing hard. It was as though the person in his twenties, who’d been through all the training, was inside him again. Yes, there was the annoying pain in his left ankle, but there was always something. The trick was to ignore the aches, the pains, the worries in your head. Spider jumped at the high wall and began climbing.

“Go baby.....Yeah, show them how it’s done.” Shouted Sarah.

Hands and feet, grabbing, climbing.....Never worrying about the likelihood of falling. Spider had seen others look down and others who'd run out of steam. He went up and over the top, letting himself drop the last six feet. Tuck and roll and he was into the home straight, just three more small obstacles to go. As he ran over the strip on the floor that marked the end, his body dropped out of combat mode. Spider felt his heart pounding, as he struggled to breathe hard enough, to get oxygen into his blood. Sarah was there with Viktoria. They'd had the easy route, walking around the outside of the course. Sarah was laughing, as Viktoria showed her the timer.

"Well.....Did I do it ?" He asked.

"Not bad Spider, not bad at all." Said Viktoria. "Six minutes and thirty-two seconds."

Spider knew he'd feel like death in the morning, but he'd done it. He'd be one of the assault team when they reached the island.

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Mara had a trainee with her, a newbie in the family. A boy this time, from what had been a prosperous part of the east. Villand had mentioned Belarus, which hadn't surprised her. Different parts of the world had sent desperate migrants into France at one time or another. Now it seemed to be Eastern Europe sending boys like Vadim. The poor kid looked no older than fifteen. Scared of his own shadow and fully of anxiety. He had a bed and food though, so the feeling of being part of Villand's family, would arrive....With time.

"They're Russian army.....I'd bet you anything on that." Said Mara.

"How you know ?" Asked Vadim.

"The way they walk, but mainly the way they look around.....Always aware of their surroundings."

The men she was certain were Russians, had arrived in an SUV and a large light blue van. The van was significant, it meant they were going to take something away. Maybe boxes of files, though it was more likely the van would contain prisoners when it left.

"Are we going in there ?" Asked Vadim.

"Well..... You're a brave one." Said Mara. "We'll have a quick look around after they've gone."

It was one of the locations they'd been routinely watching, from a discreet distance. It was an office with a loading bay at the rear. Gallaan's operatives were using the location, or the mercenaries employed by Gallaan. Mara and several others watched the office, while the people inside seemed to do very little.

"They're probably waiting for orders." Villand had said. "The business in Norway looks nasty. My guess would be our Gallaan friends in Paris have been forgotten about."

There was the sound of hammering coming from the Gallaan office, plus the noise of someone using something like an industrial masonry drill. The sort of sounds used to cover screams, or even gunfire. Low charge bullets made just a popping sound; the Israeli's had perfected the technique. No stopping power, but you didn't need stopping power when shooting someone a few feet away. Ten minutes later the blue van was moved to the loading bay.

"Are we going to call for help ?" Asked Vadim.

"Gallaan aren't our friends, Vadim." Said Mara. "The Russians raiding their office isn't a bad thing. Once they've left, we'll go over there and look around."

There was more hammering and it was nearly dark before the SUV drove away, with the van following it. Vadim went to move, but Mara put her hand on his shoulder.

"Wait....One of them might get two blocks away and remember they left something behind. I had that happen to me once."

"What happened ?" Asked Vadim.

"I'll tell you once we know each other better." Said Mara.

Mara gave it about fifteen minutes, before leaving the small van they were using to watch the office. Vadim was becoming less anxious, keeping up with her as she went through the loading bay at the rear of the office. The roller door had been left open, which wasn't a good sign. She saw the first body only a few feet away.

"Are you alright ? Go outside if you need to."

"I'll be fine." Said Vadim.

Mara knew all their faces, the six people Gallaan had assigned to their unofficial office. Three were dead from gunshot wounds. One had been beaten first, which stopped being a mystery when she noticed the open safe.

"The cops will be all over this place." Said Mara. "Did you bring gloves ?"

"Yes, three pairs."

Vadim was sounding tough and efficient, but his eyes told a different story. She could see him needing an invite to her place one evening, for pizza and a pep talk. She gently squeezed his arm.

"Put the gloves on and go through their pockets." She said. "Unlikely I know, but you might get lucky and find something useful."

"Right, I'm on it."

Mara broke one of the ten rules she drummed into new recruits. She left Vadim alone and did a quick walk around the rest of the building. The other three Gallaan people had gone. They were the senior people, the ones who knew what was going on. She didn't think the Russians had taken them away for coffee and cherry pie. By the time she was back with Vadim, he was holding something.

"What did you find ?" She asked.

"It was down the side of his sock."

A good find, she'd have probably missed it. Maybe Vadim his things in his socks ? Just a driving licence, but everything and anything, might turn out to be useful.

"Well done, a great find." She said. "Now we leave here and never come back. Soon the entire area will be full of cops banging on doors."

Vadim vomited, just before getting into their old van. Most people have seen death, usually a relative laid out in their coffin. The undertaker will have added a little makeup and tidied their hair. Seeing someone with two bullets in their chest was different. Mara knew the pep talk moment was due, though she waited until they were well away from the Gallaan office.

"What sort of food do you like ?" She asked.

"Anything really."

"You must have a favourite."

"I like Moroccan food; you couldn't buy that where I lived." Said Vadim.

"How about Moroccan food at my place tonight ? No business talk, we'll eat and.....There might even be beer."

"Great." Said Vadim.

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