

### Ruby 3

#### Chapter 18 – The Nagala

**“Ruby had once seen an old copy of The Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri in book form. The illustrations had given her nightmares for a while, all the depictions of hell. Beyond the heavy gates was something that looked beyond the nightmares of Dante, perhaps even beyond his imagination.”**

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Kallina wouldn't have visited the cellar in the Yemen, if she hadn't promised Monique some toiletries. The hot and sticky prison had never been intended as a prison for a woman. Conditions that came under the 'it serves the bastard right,' category for Max, were far too harsh for Monique. It wasn't that the woman wasn't a bastard; it was just that she'd never experienced hardship in her very pampered life. Kallina thought there was a real chance she might die of simple neglect. Whether that was a good thing depended on how you viewed it, and at the moment, Ruby wanted Monique Ostby to remain alive and well.

“There's everything you wanted, even the right brands.” Said Kallina. “Don't expect that all the time, Charlotte won't pamper you.”

“You call this pampering ?!” Snapped Monique.

“I could take it all away again.”

“No, I'm sorry.....I do appreciate you taking so much trouble.”

Monique had been alone on the bed in the store room. It was her bed now of course, the one she shared with Max. Kallina had no doubt she'd find Lionel in the downstairs bedroom.

“I brought a few more batteries for Max's radio.”

“He's in the lounge, trying to kill something. It was making scuttling sounds near the table, so I left him to it.”

“I don't blame you.....Max will kill it, he's good at that.”

Kallina left Monique to stack the boxes against the wall and went downstairs to see Lionel. She'd brought him a few tins of a brand of corned beef he'd asked for. Her mind did the whole 'this is impossible' thing, when she saw he wasn't there. He had to be in his bedroom, there was nowhere else to go.

“Lionel ! Are you there ?”

She shouted like an idiot, into an empty room. Kallina even looked under the bed, before assuming he must have decided to help Max in the scuttling creature hunt. She threw the tins of corned beef onto his bed and went back upstairs. Max was on his own in the lounge area, prodding something dead with his club.

“What did you catch ?” She asked.

“No idea, four legs....Not a snake. Tough little bastard....Had to hit it six or seven times.”

“Probably a lizard.” She said.

“This was really tough.”

“They're still discovering new species of unpleasant lizards in the Yemen..... Where's Lionel ?”

Like a well-rehearsed double act, Monique was behind her, answering for Max.

“He attacked Max, I saw it all.”

Kallina had thought it might happen. Max wasn't a guy who liked sharing anything, certainly not his woman. Still.... She had to go through the motions of asking the obvious questions.

"Consider that I am your only source of food, before answering me." Said Kallina. "What happened to Lionel?"

"He did attack me." Said Max. "We'd had a few words, but nothing to get any sane person homicidal. He came at me with the sharpened edge of a can....Look."

They had a basic first aid kit and Monique had obviously treated the wound on his neck. Blood was still seeping through the dressing. A wound quite close to the wind pipe, it could have been very nasty.

"Alright, you were attacked." Said Kallina. "What was the argument about?"

She knew, but Ruby would ask the same questions and she had to make sure. The dreadful couple needed to say it and admit what they'd done, out loud.

"Me, it was about me." Said Monique. "I told Lionel we were finished, but he kept saying I was his two nights a week, as though I was some ten dollar hooker. He hit me and when Max tried to stop him, he cut Max. Dreadful wound..... There was blood everywhere."

"So Max killed Lionel?"

No answer, just the two of them exchanging glances.

"You can just nod at me if you like."

"Don't punish Monique, it was me..... All me, she had no part in it." Said Max.

"I'm not going to punish anyone." Said Kallina. "Once maybe.....Now I'm quite happy to think of it as one less mouth to feed. You two deserve each other and it'll be interesting to see how this plays itself out."

"I'd hate to be that cynical about life." Said Monique.

"Really.....Think about that as you answer the next question. Where is the body?"

Two heads turning towards the hole in the ground, confirmed the obvious. There was nowhere else Lionel Ostby could have ended up. They'd cut him up and dropped him down the old latrine hole.

"Not exactly a dignified resting place." Said Kallina.

"It wasn't all Max....I helped cut him up." Said Monique.

As if that made anything better. Kallina leant over the hole and picked up a slight but definite odour in the rising air. The stench of decay was faint and unlikely to cause a problem in the couple's love nest.

"You two really do deserve one another. Just don't get her pregnant Max, use the condoms."

"We're not children, or stupid." Snapped Monique.

"If you say so. Keep writing down what you need, though I might not be back for a few weeks."

~ ~

Sex with Todd left her covered in sweat and tired, which was perfect. No time to worry about the next day, or the number of people relying on her. Ruby tended to be asleep the instant her head hit the pillow. Dreams lately had been largely forgotten, unless they occurred just before waking up. Even those had been the usually muddled garbage, as her brain organised and archived recent events.

"You need to listen to me."

The dream was full colour and three dimensional, which made it unusual. Sounds too, realistic sounds of being in a wood and surrounded by wildlife. Not quite day, but also not quite night either. She seemed to be walking in the half-light just before dawn or dusk.

"Who is there?" She asked.

Everything reacted to her voice. The trees rippled in tune with every word. A first for Ruby, she felt mildly nauseous while in a dream. The only building was a type of summer house, complete with a small fountain inside.

“Yes....There.....Sit and wait for us.”

There was an Asian feel to the octagonal summer house, like something found in public spaces in an Indian city. Chairs around the inside, all facing the small pool and fountain. As she sat down the inside of the building changed, the roof and walls becoming covered in thick, lush vines. There was a new sound too, the gentle tinkling of water in the fountain.

“Is any of this real ?” She muttered.

The vines moved in and out with her words and the water in the fountain drenched the ground near her feet. The forest and the summer house looked real enough, yet they were obviously part of a dreamscape. The disturbing thing was that the dream was probably someone else’s.

“Nearly there.”

Ruby knew the two glowing forms were the creatures who had told her how to find the sacred stone in her world. She’d seen a few surviving elder Das Geheimnis in their hidden city located in the Karakum desert. The same basic body shape as humans, they might well have developed from a long lost common ancestor. Throw a cloak over them with a good solid hood and they could have gone shopping in a busy store. There was nothing at all about them that was human though, she could feel it.

“This is your dream....Isn’t it ?” She asked.

They had brought stability with them, the summer house no longer pulsed in tune with her words.

“It is my dream, I am Arbiter Heranza Methun.” Said the creature to her right.

“I am merely an interloper in her dreams. I am Arbiter Nazili Anso.”

He was to her left, one of them to either side of the fountain.

“Creating this space is extremely draining and not without risk.” Said Heranza. “Should this dream collapse.....We should talk quickly and avoid that happening.”

“We’ve come to warn you that many of the Nagala have survived.” Said Nazili.

“What is a Nagala ?” Asked Ruby.

“Showing is easier than describing.” Said Heranza. “Let your mind bend with my mind, your dream flow through my dream.”

Ruby was no longer in the summer house. She was in a world that looked nothing like the modern day. Buildings the same as she’d seen in the Karakum were all around her. Their buildings, a vast city of the original Das Geheimnis. Directly in front of her was a small park and at its centre was something she shouldn’t have recognised, but did.

“The sacred stone..... It was once in the centre of Dian-Haz, our most beautiful city.”

The stone looked like a roughly hewn monolith and it stood on a small hill. It glowed yellow, the sacred stone pulsed with yellow light.

“No time..... Must move on.”

The voice was Heranza’s and Ruby seemed to float over the ground. Through a set of gates in a stone building and then down a passageway that descended into the ground.

“Guards they were, we created them. We had the arrogance to create new life, different life.”

The passageway ended at more gates, heavy gates. Even in a dream, she felt a reluctance in Heranza to go any further.

“She needs to see what we created in our arrogance.” Said Nazili.

Ruby had once seen an old copy of The Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri in book form. The illustrations had given her nightmares for a while, all the depictions of hell. Beyond the heavy gates was something that looked beyond the nightmares of Dante, perhaps even beyond his imagination.

"We created them to protect our city. They are just about indestructible." Said Nazili.

"A few survived millennia with no food, no water. Buried in the ground as the continents moved and changed. These are our arrogance made flesh, these are the Nagala." Said Heranza.

They'd put their creatures in what looked like natural caverns, Thousands of them, perhaps tens of thousands. Feline looking in many ways, though no big cat had ever been that huge. Each Nagala looked like a Panther built for a different world. A larger, more brutal and primitive world. Claws that looked capable of tearing a man in two, teeth that glinted like the best steel blades. Eyes filled with hate for anyone and anything who wasn't their masters, the Das Geheimnis. Indestructible was the word Nazili had used to describe the brutes.

"How many of them survived." Asked Ruby.

"It wasn't our doing to set them free." Said Nazili. "We have those who question the true faith, especially now there are so few of us. One of the heretics opened their cage."

"How many are there?" Repeated Ruby.

"They should have all been dead by now." Said Nazili. "They will stay in the vicinity of the sacred stone. That will help..... They are very hard to kill."

"Almost impossible." Said Heranza

"How many are there?" Shouted Ruby.

"Three hundred, we think." Said Heranza.

The cavern vanished and the summer house seemed to grow around them, like something organic.

Ruby found out it was possible to feel genuine despair in a dream.

"Three hundred..... How do I fight them?"

"You must go now, the dream is beginning to decay." Said Nazili.

"Wait..... How do I kill these..... Nagala."

Everything around her began to fade into a dirty sepia image.

"You're powerful and versatile..... You'll find a way."

Ruby woke and sat up, putting her hand up to touch the vehicle's roof. They weren't sleeping in a four by four anymore though and her hand found the canvas side of their tent.

"Fuck!" She yelled.

Todd woke and looked around, as if expecting to find a group of attackers.

"What's wrong?" He asked.

"We've got another problem."

~ ~

Olga's wrist watch had been a victim of the fight to rescue Luca. She hadn't noticed right away that the hands were no longer moving, which was a good indication of how frantic her life had been lately. Pablo had been their buyer of fuel and essentials, because his Spanish made him sound like a local.

"I actually quite like this watch." She said. "Large face, big hands and a stretchy strap."

"And only a few dollars in the service station." Said Pablo.

She watched as the minute hand swept past the number twelve, for the twentieth time since Charlotte had set off down the hill.

"We're moving." She shouted.

No more hiding in among the trees or being quiet. Pablo used his newly acquired assault rifle, to fire a burst at the hacienda in the distance. The bullets weren't likely to hit anyone at that range; it was more a statement of intent. Down the hill they charged, spacing out to left and right as they ran.

"Be careful at the fence." Yelled Pablo. "There may be traps."

Everyone knew, though reminders couldn't hurt. Luca had been told to stay behind and keep well hidden. So of course the girl was running behind her with a pistol in her right hand and a medical kit over her left shoulder.

"Noisy..... Make it noisy people." Yelled Olga.

Lights were coming on in the hacienda, lots of lights. No alarms or outside flood lights yet though. Olga was about to try and change that. She stayed a little up the hill to get the benefit of the elevation. She knelt and brought up the elderly but serviceable AR15.

"This is for Christophe." She muttered.

She wasn't a brilliant shot and the range was ridiculous. Olga aimed single shots at windows with lights in and much to her amazement she saw one of the lights go out. Two shots per window and she quickly needed to reload. As she pushed in a fresh clip, the alarms began to go off.

"I think we've upset them." Said Luca.

Crap, the girl could move silently. Olga hadn't a clue she was sat on the ground, just an arm's length away. As the rest of her rather small army reached the hacienda's perimeter fence, the flood lights came on.

"Now they'll start shooting back." Said Olga.

A few more shots at windows, before she started aiming at the banks of floodlights. Luca actually cheered as they saw the bright flash of light, as one of the floodlights exploded. Below them Igor began to use his favourite weapon for outdoor firefights. Olga could hear the steady boom of the Bozar, as he used the scoped rifle on the flood lights. One by one the floods went out, bringing darkness back to sections of the hacienda. Everyone else was firing a mixed bag of second hand assault rifles. They might not hit much, but the noise alone had to be scaring the crap out of Arturo's sicarios.

"It's all about noise and confusion." Said Olga. "All of this, just to give Charlie a chance of getting inside."

"What will she do once she's in there?"

"Are you religious Luca?"

"Yes."

"Then pray to your God that he never lets you see what hell Charlotte is about to bring to the hacienda."

Arturo's people were good. They had to be, or there would have no need to fly half way around the world to assassinate him and as many of his men as Charlie could send to hell with him. The small convoy of vehicles only put their lights on when they were near the main road. Olga knew who they were though and where they were heading.

"Do you want to use that gun tonight Luca?" She asked. "Or you can hide, as I originally told you."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Those lights you can see are his sicarios coming to see who the hell we are and kill us. They will probably do it the other way round though. Our first task is to protect our old but much loved cars. They cannot be allowed to destroy our transport out of here. It was going to be just me with the job, but I'd appreciate your help."

"Just us?"

“Yes, just us I’m afraid, we’re a little shorthanded. So....Is it fight or find somewhere to hide ?”

“I’ll help you.” Said Luca.

“Good....Come on, we’ll meet them a little way back down the track.”

~ ~

George Polandrous didn’t want to be out of the loop, just out of the action. He didn’t feel neglected, at least four people were calling him regularly to update him on the ‘Ruby situation.’ He was too old for the rough stuff, old bones didn’t bounce off the ground that well, old muscles tended to pull rather than stretch.

“Stop it George, you’re not old.” Penny kept telling him. “My mum is about the same age as you and she’s just booked a cruise to the Caribbean.”

He was beginning to think the inactivity was the problem. He wasn’t hiding from Ruby, the kids and the mayhem they usually created, he just wasn’t looking for trouble. He’d once had a shoulder freeze up from what the doctor had put down to inactivity.

“Over resting is the worst thing you can do George. The best cure is to keep moving....Gently mind you, nothing too strenuous. I’ll get my nurse to send you an exercise sheet. The Lakes George.....Treat yourself to a week in Keswick.”

That had been a few years ago and he’d thought the advice was crap. He’d gone hillwalking though and his shoulder had unfrozen in no time at all. He looked at his desk, covered in the usual paperwork that claimed most of his average day. It was as though a light had suddenly come on.

“I’m not old....I just need to look for a little.... Trouble.” He muttered.

He stood up and walked up to the window that gave the best view of Central London, the City. London had seen better days, but it was still one hell of a view. There was a huge advantage to glass partitions, or a disadvantage. It tended to depend on who wanted privacy from whom. As he turned, he saw Kallina talking to Penny in her office.

“Perfect..... Perfect timing.” He muttered.

They were having coffee, which gave him the perfect excuse to go into Penny’s office with his own coffee and a packet of chocolate digestives. He was yet to meet any woman who didn’t like chocolate biscuits. He used his bottom to push open the office door.

“Room for another ?” He asked. “I have brought biscuits.”

“Oh...I like those.” Said Kallina.

“Come in George.....It appears there’s trouble in Paris, or likely to be.” Said Penny.

Those were the words Penny said, yet George only heard about an opportunity to get involved in a little trouble. He sat at the edge of Penny’s desk and spilled the digestives onto the back of a large manilla envelope.

“Grab one, or I’ll eat the lot.” He said. “Now what was this about trouble in Paris ? I spoke to Malou on.....It must have been last Friday. Everything was fine then.”

“I was in Paris an hour ago.” Said Kallina. “I told her then that Lionel Ostby is dead, killed by Max Krause. Probably my fault of course....I could see the likely outcome of Monique sleeping with Max.” The room didn’t spin about or anything, though there was a sense of unreality about the beautiful young Monique choosing a monster like Max as her lover.

“Poor Monique.....I know she was plotting against Ruby, but.....She must be devastated.” Said Penny.

“Devastated.... The bitch helped.” Said Kallina. “She even took part in cutting up her husband’s body. I’ve seen it before with Max, he draws young women into his madness. She isn’t the first, but hopefully she’ll be the last.”

“Dreadful, truly dreadful.” Said Penny.

“Malou now expects repercussion, the Ostbys are a well-connected and wealthy family.” Said Kallina. “The police will put a lot of effort into tracing them. Partly I think the problem is that everyone has now left Paris. Malou will be feeling a little alone, maybe even deserted.”

“It’s a pity Rory isn’t here; he could have gone to help her.” Said Penny. “What do you think George? Maybe I could ask Foxy if he has anyone spare?”

There it was smiling at him, the perfect opportunity.

“My desk is driving me crazy.....I’ll go.” He said. “Two days in Paris, three at the most. It’ll do me good and I haven’t seen Malou in.....It must be fifteen years.”

“Are you sure?.....Penny said things here are really busy.” Said Kallina.

“I’m sure the office will survive without me.”

“Yes..... Do I need to arrange for anyone to go with you?” Asked Penny. “I’ve still got the phone number of the close protection company we used last time there was....A Ruby related incident.” Tempting to say no and go alone, but he wasn’t stupid. His heart was already beating faster, Ruby related incidents tended to do that. The next few days were likely to make him feel ten years younger, but were also likely to be dangerous.

“That’s a good idea Penny. No one who stands out like a sore thumb though. See if they’ve got a husband and wife team, or a couple.”

“I’m glad you’re going George, I’m going to be needed in Uganda for quite some time.” Said Kallina.

“Uganda? Oh yes, Foxy did say something cryptic about crossing borders.”

George was there in the room physically, but his mind was beginning to fill up with thoughts of Paris and adventure. A Ruby related incident, a two person close protection team and a few nights in Paris.

“Perfect.” He muttered.

“What was that George?” Asked Penny.

“The chocolate biscuits Penny..... They’re perfect.”

~ ~

Charlotte didn’t have the power to become ethereal, or invisible to the human gaze. If she concentrated though, she could easily avoid the pressure plates and cameras placed around the hacienda. Sensors looking for hot bodies were more of a problem. Bringing her body temperature down was possible, but that would slow her down. Charlotte took a few chances and managed to get within fifty feet of the Hacienda, without triggering any alarms. An assault rifle bullet ripped into a banana palm not that far away, causing part of it to break off and fall to the ground.

“Olga never was that good with those things.” She mumbled.

The threat from friendly fire was real, though it was about twentieth on her mental list of ways she might die before the sun came up again. All those conversations with Kallina had paid off, plus the wise words of Pablo and the others. She now understood why battles were ten percent planned and ninety percent chaos. It was impossible to plan for a scenario, where someone was intent on killing you, simple as that. Klaxons began to sound and the hacienda’s floodlights came on.

“It’s show time.” She muttered.

She walked quickly, too quickly for anyone to see as dusk approached full night. An outside door moving slightly in the breeze caught her attention. It was supposed to be impossible to reach the hacienda without triggering an alarm; all the guards would know that. Hardly surprising that the door hadn’t been locked. Charlotte was inside and although Arturo didn’t realise it, death had entered his home, his fortress.

“..... Just a few bandits paid to cause mischief....Leon and Ami will make short work of them...”  
Voices not far away and the distinct odour of coffee and food. Good, a kitchen with a dining hall would make the perfect place to begin. Charlotte heard a muffled explosion and the lights in the hallway flickered.

“Well done Olga, I knew I could rely on you.”

Peering carefully through a gap in the door, showed her a dining hall with half a dozen men not really enjoying a late dinner. They looked scared, like men who knew it wasn't just a few poorly paid bandits attacking the hacienda. Charlie just hoped that Olga was ready to deal with Leon and Ami when they arrived.

“.....Come on.....Everyone back on duty.....You've had your orders...” Someone shouted.

Fire was Charlotte's usual weapon of choice. A little unimaginative, but reliable. Fire killed, maimed and terrified those who survived. In many ways it was the perfect weapon of war, especially if you were outnumbered. Charlie was watching and learning all the time though and Ruby had talked to her about becoming quite keen on the use of force, huge amounts of force.

“..... Crushing and striking Charlie, turning nearby objects into weapons....Just as destructive as fire.....Just as terrifying to those it spares...”

She'd already pulled energy into herself, from the land surrounding the hacienda. She'd done it carefully while walking, though most of the banana palms would never bear fruit again. Charlotte opened the dining hall door and released a wall of pure force in the direction of men. Probably too much energy, but she could always draw more from the farmland behind the hacienda. Tables, chairs, even a few floorboards became part of her weapon. She saw her force wall rip her enemies apart before throwing them at the far wall. Too much force, definitely too much. The far wall had gone too, spread over a small garden, along with the men she'd just stopped being a threat. Fairly dark now and a few wires in what was left of the ceiling were sparking.

“Too much, far too..... Massive.” She muttered.

Charlotte knew who was alive or dead, auras changed with death and everyone who'd been trying to enjoy an evening meal, was now dead. Their auras were still there, each man had a light red glow, though they'd eventually dissipate.

“Live off the land girl, live off the land.” She mumbled.

She had her own gun, but she'd learned a lot from Serge and the training room in his basement.

Three times....Three times she'd actually beaten Ruby in Serge's private kill room.

“You can never carry enough ammo and guns jam.” He'd told her. “Pick up whatever works for you, but don't be too picky.”

A machine gun wasn't that far from her feet, an Uzi by the look of it, but it wasn't her sort of weapon.

“Don't be too picky.....”

Serge had been right..... She picked up the Uzi and slung it over her shoulder. She still had an automatic pistol in her pocket, but she picked up a Glock and added it to her portable arsenal. In a pocket of course, never jammed down the back of her belt.

“Too easy to go for the gun too quickly, hit the safety catch too soon..” Serge had once told them all.

“And give yourself a second arsehole.”

No need to blow out a wall, or find a door to another corridor. Charlotte stepped through the hole in the wall, enjoying the night scented flowers in the garden. She could feel them, all the men and women in the hacienda and all of them felt scared. Not one of them though, he or she didn't



appears to be perturbed at all. That one unbothered mind was at the rear of the Hacienda, on the second floor.

"Got you.....I think." She muttered.

Charlie knew the man and woman were going to run out of a doorway, she'd seen their slight glow as they'd run along the corridor. She'd have ignored them if they hadn't begun to raise their guns. Just enough time to register that the woman was expensively dressed for a guard. Thoughts about her being one of Arturo's family, only came into her mind after she'd turned them both into pillars of flame. Old habits die hard and there was something satisfying about using fire, a certain finality about it. Something about the purging flames.....Was almost spiritual.

"I'm coming for you now Arturo." She shouted.

In her mind she saw his guards grouping together near the stairs to get up to the second floor. There had to be nearly twenty of them, heavily armed and waiting..... Waiting for her. Charlotte smiled and headed straight towards them. There were two walls in the way, but she knew how to deal with those.

~ ~

Olga didn't have quite the same love affair with Bozar rifles as Igor. An old design and the 5.56mm ammo didn't do the amount of damage that modern weapons could inflict. The weapons trader hadn't had a warehouse full of modern weapons though and the Bozar was still a good rifle. The one she'd left near their vehicles even had a webbing strap. With luck and a little skill, she could brace it and shoot accurately on the move. It was the skill part that worried her; she'd never claimed to be that good with hand guns or rifles.

"You mustn't panic Luca. " She said. "I'll be out there, even though you won't see me. I'm leaving the car's headlights on. When they come to investigate.....I'll take care of them. If you think they're too close to your position.... You know what to do."

"Yes, I'll shoot them..... And stay hidden."

"The staying hidden bit is important. Don't panic and try to run away."

"I won't."

Olga really wasn't sure if Luca really had what it took to aim a gun at another human being and fire, few people did. She'd seen some really hard looking characters completely lose it once the fighting started.

"Go on.... Get hidden. I can see their lights coming up the hill."

She watched as Luca got behind the four foot high stump of what must have once been, a fairly massive tree. Trees made good cover, they stopped bullets better than a Kevlar vest. And the girl was completely hidden.

"May whatever God created Ruby and her little monsters, look after you Luca." She muttered.

No time to waste, Olga thanked genetics and tough parents for her long legs and strong back. She picked up the Bozar and a shoulder bag full of spare ammunition. Rifle over her shoulder and she was up on her toes and running. Those long legs came into their own; she could have probably surprised a few professional athletes. She ran to meet the enemy, until she saw their headlight turn a corner. Olga found a solid living tree quite near the road. A nice looking tree, its width would adequately give cover for her entire body. She braced the Bozar with the webbing sling, before leaning against the tree. A sniper rifle with a scope, but the Bozar also fired in semiautomatic mode and it had a magazine that held thirty rounds.

"Here we go.... Here we go..... Here we go." She muttered.

Olga didn't aim at the headlights as the car came around the corner, she wanted them to carry on illuminating the road. She fired twenty shots very quickly, aimed at the front of the car and where she estimated the windscreen would be. No one could ever accuse the Bozar of being a stealth weapon, the noise was incredible. Unsurprisingly the car came to a halt. A minute went by, then another.

"I'm not impressed guys." Said Olga, as she pushed herself hard against the tree.

It had to have been five minutes after she'd stopped firing, before anyone fired back at her. That was bad, very bad, for them. For her it was good, they were either poorly trained or ludicrously over confident. Her bet was on over confident. Bullets ripped into her tree, two hand guns and a shotgun. Nothing heavy or fully automatic.

"Over confidence will kill you every time." She muttered.

Olga backed away from the tree and moved quickly to another. She switched to single shots and aimed her ancient but efficient weapon towards their car. Someone was trying to start the engine, she could hear the starter motor whirring.

"Get it off the road.....We need to get through....."

"I'm doing my best Ami, the engine is fucked."

Weird, they seemed to have forgotten a living and reasonably well armed enemy was still in the trees. Perhaps they'd assumed she'd run off into the night. Ami was a female and like Olga, she had blonde hair that refused to stay put. A lot of it was spilling out from under her hood and the car lights were making it almost glow in the dark. A good target and Olga wasn't squeamish about slaughtering her own gender, if the need arose.

"Come on Ami, move a bit more to my right..... Tell him off again." She muttered.

"Push this thing out of the way if....."

Olga aimed a little below the glowing hair, two shots at where Ami's chest was almost certain to be. Two booms from the Bozar, which seemed to echo through the trees. Olga saw movement in the sights, and then there was Ami, lying on the ground in front of the headlights. Finally, someone had the sense to turn off the car's lights. The answering fire when it came, was again from hand guns and a solitary shotgun.

"I'm almost enjoying this." She mumbled.

~ ~

Hubris was her downfall, an excessive belief in her own skills and powers. Charlotte had easily dealt with over twenty well-armed guards, only to be shot by someone hiding at the top of the stairs. One man, crouching behind a heavy dark wood hall cabinet. She should have slowed down and looked for auras.....Hubris though, it can be a killer. He'd shot her in the back, somewhere near her right kidney. Charlie had stumbled, though she hadn't fallen over.

"Fuck !" She yelled.

Turning she saw him, the man who looked quite young. Eighteen maybe less, she felt fear in his mind as he raised the gun to shoot her again. No feeling sorry for him, no mercy. He had just given her what might turn out to be a mortal wound. Up went her hand and she actually did feel sorry for the young sicario. Charlotte used a huge amount of energy to crush him, to push right around the young man, almost folding him in on himself. By the time she stopped pushing and crushing, the heap of bloody bones and muscles on the floor, no longer looked like a man. Adrenaline was keeping her from feeling the pain, she was literally too high to feel anything.

"Oh crap ! That must be bad."

No chance to hide properly, she had to rely on seeing anyone approaching as glowing shapes in her mind. There were quite a few people up on the second floor, but none of them were heading her way. Charlotte took off her jacket and shirt, before looking at the wound.

“Fuck !” She yelled, again.

The bullet had gone right through and even touching the nasty exit wound nearly made her pass out. She knew the human body was as complicated as a Swiss watch. There were no empty spaces for bullets to harmlessly pass through on their way out, that was only in movies. Before worrying about what might have been damaged inside, she had to stop the pool of blood on the floor from getting any bigger. Luckily Luca had talked her into putting a few first aid items in her backpack.

“This was all so much easier without the pain.” She muttered.

Serge had been through how to handle various types of physical damage on the move, when you didn’t have the luxury of a doctor nearby. Charlie screamed as she pushed a trauma pack against the wound in her back and pushed it into the hole the bullet had made.

“Crap ! If I survive..... You’re going to die slowly Arturo.” She shouted.

No sign of movement on the floor above, they probably hadn’t heard her. She screamed again as she repeated the trick with the trauma pack, on the large wound quite close to her belly button. After that, running a tight bandage round her middle to hold it all in place, was easy-peasy. It wasn’t over though, battlefield first aid isn’t the same as being treated in a comfy emergency department, with a clean bed waiting in a ward. Luca had included a role of duct tape. Charlie did pass out for a second, as she pulled the tape round her body to keep the dressings in place. Once the fog cleared from her mind, she was quite pleased with her efforts.

“Well..... Nothing essential is likely to fall out.” She muttered.

Standing up wasn’t a huge problem, though everything near her middle hurt, a lot. She was still bleeding, though not at a fast enough rate to stop her reaching the second floor. She had to get up there and kill Arturo, it was all that mattered to her. No huge explosion to take out the entire hacienda, no ball of fire to destroy the second floor. She had to be looking at him, she had to see him die with her own eyes. Her shirt and jacket went back on and the pack went over her shoulder. After the first few paces, it wasn’t that painful to walk.

“Will I come back again this time ?” She muttered.

When she’d been killed on the streets on Vladivostok, something strange had happened. She’d come back from the dead. Not as her old body brought back to life, that had been incinerated by Ruby. Her gifts had created her again, like a supernatural photocopy. No side effects, no added weaknesses and definitely no sudden craving for brains. She’d come back as a perfect copy of her old self. Both Kallina and Ruby had warned her not to rely on the trick and that it might have been a one off.

“We’ll cross that bridge.....If I come to it.” She mumbled.

It mattered that she didn’t look wounded. She made herself strut to the bottom of the stairs leading up. A small amount of power, just enough to sound like a grenade going off. She threw the ball of energy up the stairs, enjoying the chaos it had to be causing on the second floor. In her mind she could see them, scurrying about.

“Ready or not.....I’m coming up there.” She shouted.

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