

Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

Chapter 22 – Something Brewing

“The Russian dolls everywhere were a little strange, but even his own marauders were buying those. Every bus trip to Moscow, seemed to add another dozen Matryoshka to their Antonov home. McGill was sure they were becoming a hazard, but as with so many other things, he’d chosen not to mention them.”

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Ronald Kelly knew that George and Malou were both there. A nice house in a decent part of North London. Not Highgate or one of the better bits of Finchley, but an expensive postcode to find a decent house. It seemed that Malou had finally decided to trust running the hotel to the official manager. She was now living with George for a while. No MI5 snoopers were needed to tell him the information. A man on the hotel’s reception desk had told him, during quite a short phone call. Ronald was expected; the door opened before his finger reached the doorbell.

“I saw you coming up the path.” Said Malou.

The last time someone had said that to him, it had been just before showing him a bloody corpse. That was partly the reason for his need to see them.

“Coffee is on.....Cheese on toast too.” Malou Added. “He said you have a bit of a thing for it.”

“He’s not wrong.”

Something about the lounge still yelled bachelor pad, though Ronald was sure Malou would soon add a few feminine touches. Foxy always said his lady housekeeper stopped his home from looking too, lone male. Coffee arrived and George really did make great cheese on toast. No files on this visit, or pictures. Ronald did get out his notebook though. His memory was good, but looking up dates and times, was part of his routine for such meetings.

“Today, Britain lost a knight, a man given the honour two decades ago.” Said Ronald. “He leaves a very confused wife, several children and two grandchildren. Whoever killed him was just a day ahead of special branch arriving, with their handcuffs. We’d discovered he was the top of the heap, the final link in the chain. The knight of the realm had arranged to have the Polandrous offices watched. Ultimately, he was also responsible for the attack on Penny Green.”

“Wow.....Who was he ?” Asked George.

“I’d love to tell you, but a D-notice was slapped on the story.” Said Ronald. “Not legally binding of course, though most editors obey them. A foreign paper will leak it all of course, they always do, but until then.....I’m forbidden to tell you.”

“Of all the cheek.....I could easily find out.” Said Malou.

“I’m sure you could, with one phone call.” Said Ronald. “Or, you could wait a week or two, for it to appear in La Stampa, or something similar. His wife seems genuinely confused. A good life, though there had been money problems a few years ago. I’m sure she had no idea her husband had a side hustle going on, obtaining everything from hitmen to a couple of guys to beat up a business rival. I think she deserves to bury her husband without the press camped outside her house.”

“Yes.....Yes, of course. Poor woman.” Said Malou.

“You may be a little naïve.” Said George. “Personally, I believe.....Wives always know.”

“George.....Stop annoying Ronald.” Said Malou. “We will not get involved, until it appears in the press....The English press.”

“Fine.....Fine.” Muttered George.

Ronald had seen the body, only a few hours after Sir James Harris had been killed. Someone had been making a point, it reminded Ronald of pictures he’d seen of those killed by drug cartels. No chance of an open coffin, though the funeral people could sometimes do wonders. He’d been cut dreadfully, while still alive. Three separate weapons, including a machete. Despite looking like the work of a psychopath, the attending physician had thought otherwise.

“Looks random, but they knew where to cause the maximum pain, while keeping him alive. Not a young man, in the end his heart couldn’t take the pain.”

Ronald had seen quite a lot of death, some of it ugly and violent. There was something about the way the wife had reacted to finding her husband. The tears that hadn’t stopped until their family doctor had given her something.

“So.....We can now stop hiring extra security ?” Asked George.

“Yes, it’d be nice to get back to normal.” Said Malou. “Whatever normal is.....It’s been a very strange few months.”

If it had been his choice, Ronald probably wouldn’t have told them. Malou was fine, but George seemed to view being told to keep things quiet, as almost a personal challenge. It had been Foxy though; he’d insisted that George and Malou had to know. There was a warning to go with the information though, a strong warning.

“You might want to keep the extra muscle.” Said Ronald. “The choice is yours, but I’ve something to tell you both. This is to be considered totally confidential. Foxy says that if the information is leaked, you’ll be off his Christmas card list. I’m sure you understand what he means ?”

“No further cooperation, we’re not stupid.” Said Malou.

“I have learned my lesson, no more private missions and investigations.” Said George.

Which Ronald had heard him say before. But.....Foxy had given him instructions to tell them. Of course, they’d pass it on to Ruby, but who else ? Ruby was currently being trained in a military facility near Moscow.

“We’re not definitely linking the death in London to anything else, that’s important.” Said Ronald.

“To be honest we have no certainty about what is going on. It might be something Olga has been working on, or something else entirely. Senior people at Gallaan Industries are going missing, three of them so far. Rumours of them pissing off the Russians, though not everyone is buying that idea. The only fact is three senior executives vanishing without trace.....Something is brewing, something big.”

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“Well..... Fletcher Xavier Rusinek, I will miss you.” Said Olga.

“It feels the right time.” Said Flex. “Gallaan will have too many problems, to worry about any grudge they might have against me.”

They hugged and Olga really was going to miss Flex, maybe his family too, just a little. The kid sister had lost any fear of her, which could sometimes be annoying. His entire family had begun to treat her mansion as theirs, which meant Olga losing her precious moments of privacy. Eugenie had come to say goodbye to Flex, though her boyfriend, Lorenzo, had excused himself.

“You have my number.” Said Eugenie. “Any problem, pick up the phone.....No matter where you are in the world.”

The sting had worked, the Russian military now hated Gallaan. There had been the deaths of the shipping agent and the cut off. After that, Olga hadn't thought there'd be much thought behind the Russian revenge. They'd surprised Olga though, by going after Gallaan worldwide. A raided office in Brazil one day, to leaving a scene of slaughter in Paris the next. A mix of someone's rage, someone at the top, and a need to deter anyone else thinking of ripping off the Russians.

"What is the latest news?" Asked Flex. "Are the Russians leaving bodies, right across Europe?"

"Yes, but they're going after the top Gallaan executives." Said Olga. "I never saw that one coming. Someone in the Russian military seems intent on destroying Gallaan by cutting off the head of the snake. As of today, five senior Gallaan executives have vanished. They might be dead, or screaming in a cellar somewhere."

"Wow.....At least this means Ruby won't be attacked by them again." Said Eugenie.

"It also means I can give my family a proper home." Said Flex.

Eugenie hugged Flex and Olga could feel the tension between them. As far as she knew it was an unrequited passion, but Lorenzo had been right. There was something there, something more than simple friendship.

"Alright.....Put him down Eugenie, or get a room." Said Olga. "Where are you off to, Flex? I know it's Belgium first, but after that?"

"Yes, we've bank accounts in Belgium and I've a small apartment there. Not in my name, of course. A short time there to catch my breath, then.....Who knows. I might give mum a dart and get her to throw it at a map of the world."

"You could have just said you didn't want to tell us." Said Eugenie.

"It's not like that."

"Yes it is.....I don't blame you." Said Olga. "We're those gangsters who abducted your family. Somewhere deep down you'll always think of us in that way. Go, disappear....Just keep my number. If you get a bad feeling about being followed or anything, call me. Or Eugenie of course."

"But don't hire mercenaries." Added Eugenie.

"What are mercenaries?"

The kid sister was at her office door, again. There were hugs for her and then for Flex's mum, as she came to find out where he was. It was a strange goodbye to a family she'd once kept imprisoned in a construction site, a half-completed gymnasium. Mum was still just mum though and Flex's dad was just dad. Even the kid sister was the thing of evil, or nuisance. Olga knew their names, there was even a list somewhere. Not using them helped though, when it was time to say goodbye.

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Einar Gunnarsson knew there'd been problems at a few Gallaan facilities. No one was being serious about it in public, or confirming rumours. All hearsay and a few tiny facts, but it was all forming a pattern. Something was brewing, something huge. Hearsay said one of the Gallaan teams in Paris had been slaughtered, to a man. Later another rumour mentioned a few of them being taken prisoner, poor bastards. It had been like that for a while. No solid information, just enough muttering in the undergrowth to make people edgy. Soldiers about to go into combat, weren't helped by anything that made them edgy. Nick Teems had arrived that morning, officially to deliver a final briefing on 'Mission Lekang,' as it was being called. Nick had also promised an honest update on the situation regarding attacks on their facilities.

"Yes, I can confirm there have been fatalities in Paris and Madrid." Said Nick. "Gallaan as an organisation is huge, we employ more people in more countries than a famous cola company. We are still operating at full efficiency."

Employing more people than Pepsi was an old joke, it always got a chuckle. Being huge wasn't always a plus though, it gave enemies a large choice of targets.

"A friend said a few top executives have been abducted." Said Lena. "Is that true?"

Einar had heard the rumours, executives from finance and logistics. Pen pushers according to some, nothing to get worried about. Non-combatants almost certainly, but all good corporations were finance driven. And no company survived unless the lorries with their orders arrived. Trained operative rarely got hysterical, but there was a little murmuring in the hall, coupled with some general muttering.

"Look.....Calm down, everyone." Said Nick. "A tiny number of senior people have been abducted, by persons unknown. Every role in the Gallaan organisation has a backup, even at top board level. You will be paid and supplies will still be arriving. Extra security personnel have been assigned to key locations. Don't panic.....Gallaan is still a kickass corporation."

"Ammunition can run out pretty quickly." Someone said. "Nothing worse than hearing the click as all you're got left....Is an empty clip."

"Fuel too.....I was in Chechnya when we ran out of diesel." Said another soldier. "We lost some good men and we had to leave their bodies behind."

"And ration packs need to arrive." Said Einar. "I'm rather partial to eating regularly."

Einar thought you could tell the mood of a room, by whether the audience still found things to laugh at. They chuckled at his ration packs comment, which was a good sign. If they stopped finding things amusing, it was time to leave, or join the insurgency.

"Come on.....Do you need me to remind you of Gallaan's profits for the last five years?" Asked Nick. "We're solid.....Super solvent and we never, ever, let our people down. Fuel, bullets, we've even found a supplier for gourmet rations. I'm not joking, someone in Bakersfield is producing them. You will be looked after....Trust me."

"Fine, but we needed to be certain." Said Lena.

"I do understand that." Said Nick. "I've arranged for a little extra for each of you, a loyalty bonus that'll be in your bank accounts in the morning. Now.....We must get to that final briefing I came to give you."

Using a hotel ballroom hadn't been a great idea, but there were a lot of Gallaan soldiers, spread out across several town and cities. Getting them together in Tromsø had been a major feat of logistics, but it brought risks. There'd definitely be a few rumours about who they were, circulating around Tromsø by the following day.

"Alright, I'm assuming you've all tried the new energy weapons?" Asked Nick.

"Oh yeah." Someone said. "We just need Sigourney Weaver now, and those aliens won't stand a chance."

Nick was in his elements with an audience eager to hear what he had to say. Lots of highly trained ex-special ops fighters from all over the world. All of them armed with weapons still on the secret list of most developed nations. Of course they were going to win, easy-fucking-peasy. Einar had seen the creatures fight though and they were a long way from being mindless predators. Nick gave a full briefing, but never mentioned anything about a fast extraction, should things not go their way. One Israeli drill sergeant was the only person to ask a fairly obvious question.

"Backup.....What is the position with regard to a backup?"

"Gallaan has a standing army to rival many small nations." Said Nick. "Spread across the globe, but they can be mobilised very quickly."

"Are you saying there is no backup?" Persisted the Israeli.

Nick didn't like being asked to clarify anything, Einar had noticed that in the past.

"I'm saying nothing of the sort." Snapped Nick. "Gallaan can provide backup from their reserve of operatives."

"Hmmm.....So, no backup."

Nick ignored the drill sergeant after that and did a good job of the rest of the briefing. By the end of it, Einar thought a good ninety percent of those present, were happy, sold on the idea of an easy and fast victory. The other ten percent ? Einar was one of them, far from convinced things were going to happen as per the briefing. No battle plan survives first contact with the enemy, every soldier knows that. Like Einar, the unconvinced were likely to be there for the money, while hoping they lived to spend it.

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Guardian Ishel, now known as the mother of her people, loved to complain that Ruby was dishonest. In truth, she'd only told Ruby a little of the truth about her rogues. Yes, they were relatively small in number, but there were more of her Das Geheimnis than she'd revealed. As for breeding ? That was problematic, which was why Kurt and Kallina had resorted to hybrids to guarantee a future for their own wunderkinds, the super children. To Ishel any mixing of bloodlines with the humans was treason, unthinkable. There were other options and her people were clever, far more knowledgeable about Das Geheimnis biology than anyone suspected, even Ruby.

Cells could be fertilised in laboratories. Those cells could be encouraged to multiply at a far faster rate than was normal. Done carefully, the resulting foetus could be given accelerated growth. With a lot of care and the right conditions, a fertilised egg cell could become a rogue adult, in under a year. There had been some failures, dreadfully malformed babies, destroyed at birth. Not that many though and Ishel often quoted the human saying about needing to break a few eggs to make an omelette.

"Move the incubators now and we could lose half the month one foetuses." Said Doffle.

"Half.....Really, that many ?" She said.

"Yes, they're incredibly fragile at that stage." Replied Doffle.

Ishel like Doffle, he had a first-class mind. She was seriously considering using his seed to fertilise a few of her own eggs. Her rogues were long lived, as was she. None of them were immortal though and one day, there'd need to be a new queen.

"They're all so precious." She said. "Losing one would be unthinkable."

Through the toughened glass, she could see a section of the reproduction facility, the baby labs as her people insisted on calling them. Not a bad name really, though Ishel had a thing about using the correct name for things and places. In the privacy of her own thoughts though, she too thought of the view through the glass as the baby labs, the place where her future army was growing at an accelerated rate. The young, the next generation. They were the reason she was committed to defending the island. The baby labs were deep below ground, not far from Finnsaeterkollen Trailhead. Ishel would happily set the entire world ablaze, to save the next generation.

"How many are ready to fight ?" She asked.

"Well.....We're not talking about those from this year." Said Doffle. "The problem is that we can produce adults very quickly, but educating them.....That still takes several years, even using memory implantation. I'd say.....About fifty are fully ready to become soldiers."

It was a well-known conundrum, for all intelligent life. Ishel thought her rogues were superior to humans, but they'd all originated on planet Earth. That meant they were all plagued by the large brain at birth conundrum. Intelligence needs a big brain, which means a large head. Big heads can

mean problems giving birth, as any mother knows. Nature either fills a brain with pre-loaded information, or relies on education of the young. Human children were born with partly formed brains and her people weren't much better. Their intelligence and creativity as adults, relied on decades of learning and so far at least....That was proving hard to speed up.

"If we're under attack, there may be a need to use those without proper training." She said. "Those with sharp claws and teeth, can serve their people well....Even without education. How many are we talking about, at that stage?"

"I'm assuming we're talking about those able to recognise which side they're on?"

"Sarcasm Doffle.....We are talking about a time when there may be no other option." She said.

Doffle didn't like it, she could tell by his expression. Ishel didn't like the idea either, but it was better than losing everything. There were a few mutations who'd been considered too bad to be educated, but close enough to normal to avoid the incinerators. She was thinking about sending them out to fight, if things looked bad.

"Fifty trained fighters and.....Two hundred developed enough to fight with tooth and claw. I can probably find another ten from the D-Labs, the mutants." Said Doffle.

"Yes Doffle, if we're attacked, we'll need everyone, even our monsters."

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McGill was finding it easier to work with Ruby and her strange assortment of friends, wunderkinds and military helpers. There was something a bit off with the kids, which he'd chosen not to mention. He was being paid well by people in London, people with connection in the British security services. Do a good job and the security services were the ultimate old boy or old girl network. There would be more lucrative work in the future. Add on the promise of training with advanced weaponry and McGill wasn't ecstatic, but he was reasonably happy. The Russian dolls everywhere were a little strange, but even his own marauders were buying those. Every bus trip to Moscow, seemed to add another dozen Matryoshka to their Antonov home. McGill was sure they were becoming a hazard, but as with so many other things, he'd chosen not to mention them. He was currently holding an energy weapon that reminded him more of computer games, than military training. Not quite as huge as the famous BFG in Doom games, but it looked just as lethal.

"Proximity is an issue." Said Todd. "Fire it too close to yourself, or someone on your side and you may find out for sure, if there is an afterlife."

"Wow, sounds nasty." Said McGill.

McGill knew he was grinning from ear to ear. There had been a terrorist killed by Ruby at Aden airport and everyone had talked about it for days. Seeing someone else use that much instant lethality was one thing. Having the weapon in his own hands.....That was a whole new level of cool. He was stood one end of a thirty-metre firing range, with targets at the other. Manikins were their targets, plastic but rather old and dusty, manikins. Sarah had found a wholesaler of that kind of thing and had charmed the owner into parting with a lorry load of old stock, at a bargain price.

"I take it you've no ethical problem with killing manikins?" Said Todd.

It was a running joke; someone had put up a poster saying that even plastic people had feelings.

"Please, I've had instruction up to my ears." Said McGill. "Can I fire it now?"

"Alright, one shot when you're ready." Said Todd. "Centre on the target of your choice."

These were the new weapons from London and they were more powerful than the older version. There had been a few problems. The Russians had built a range for projectile weapons, using large numbers of sandbags. Use energy weapons on sandbags and you end up with burning sacks and weird creations in what looks like molten glass. After a few adjustments based on 'that was worse,

try another way,' they'd found a way to hit the targets, but nothing that mattered. It was all about giving everyone a feel for using the weapons, while not destroying parts of Kaluga.

"Does it kick ?" Asked McGill.

"No, zero recoil." Said Todd.

Now he had the green light to fire, McGill was feeling nervous. He aimed the weapon at the manikin of a man. Someone had put a worn-out hat on the plastic man, together with a broken umbrella in his hand. McGill centred on the torso and pressed the fire button. It felt like nothing had happened, the energy weapon didn't even tremor. The lightning like sound was still there, but greatly reduced. As for the poor manikin ? It was a pile of molten plastic, with a burning hat on top.

"That was.....Amazing." Said McGill. "Will it do the same to human targets ?"

"It is actually designed for maximum damage when fired at living tissue." Said Todd.

McGill had a nasty idea in his brain and it was refusing to shut up.

"Do they have these ?" He asked. "The bad guys I mean, the creatures near Skagen ?"

"A few maybe, but a far older version." Said Ruby.

McGill hadn't noticed her arrive, she seemed to be able to walk across any floor, without making a sound.

"Can I have another shot ?" Asked McGill.

"Sorry.....If we give everyone two shots, we'll run out of plastic men." Said Ruby.

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Constantly moving around, one grubby and dusty building to another. Gérard Villand knew it was making his allergies worse and he'd always sneezed at just about everything. It was his life though and had been for many years. Too late to change now and his nomadic lifestyle had kept him safe. No internet connection, they could be traced. No mail was ever delivered to the various temporary headquarters of his organisation. Even phone numbers changed as he moved around Paris and its environs. He was just an old guy sat in a dilapidated building. Everything he heard came via a small number of trusted people and just about all his orders, were delivered on his behalf, by Mara. Old school, through and through. Mara put her head around the door to his office.

"I sent Vadim out for coffee and doughnuts." She said.

She was shaking one of the coffee shop cups at him, the ones with tops that always leaked. He loathed those cups, but the coffee smelled good. She had a bag in her other hand, which was probably the doughnuts.

"Are they fresh ?" He asked.

"Yes, Vadim only just got back with them."

He waved her forward and after depositing the coffee and bag on his desk, Mara sat in the chair that had effectively become hers. The furniture was the one stable thing in his office, it had gone everywhere with him, for more years than he liked to think about. Villand sipped at the coffee, before nibbling a doughnut.

"Not bad, send Vadim there again." He said.

A metal framed chair with a green leather seat and back. Years old, no one else would have been comfortable in it. Mara leant back and looked totally relaxed.

"I know you hate assumptions." Said Mara. "Let's just say that the surveillance team are ninety percent certain. It looks like Gallaan have lost another one, another senior executive."

"The Russians again ?" He asked.

"Yes, and that's definite." Said Mara. "The usual SUV and van combo, with half a dozen people in the obligatory dark clothing. One woman among them and we got a picture of her. One of the FSB's new

quick track recruits, a real likelihood of reaching the top. Sofia Makarova was in Finland until two weeks ago, so the Russians are bringing in their talented people.”

Malou had muttered something to Aria, about Olga planning something to get Gallaan and the Russians fighting like rats in a sack. Mara had passed on the information and after a little digging, the idea of a sting had been discovered. A sting so complicated, that even Malou thought it would never work. Obviously, it had and the Russians had gone to war against Gallaan Industries, in their own rather strange way.

“Who was the target this time ?” Asked Villand.

“Gallaan’s director of logistics for Western Europe. A Swiss national, Dorian Bachmann.”

A Swiss national, the Russians really didn’t seem to care who they pissed off. Villand looked at the ceiling, as he ate a second doughnut.

“Alright.....The quick version, Mara. Tell me what happened to Mr Dorian Bachmann ?”

“I’ve been using a surveillance team to watch the Gallaan execs most likely to be abducted. A huge task, with a tiny number of people, but we got lucky. The Russian team arrived at his house around midnight. An out of the way place, not far from Amiens. They grabbed Dorian, but left his wife in one piece. One child, a girl. Wife and child were both duct taped at wrists and ankles. As Dorian wasn’t in the SUV when it left, I’m assuming he was in the van. The surveillance team did look over the house afterwards and they say he wasn’t there.”

“Did they call the police ?” Asked Villand.

“No, standing orders.....We never inform the police about anything.” Said Mara.

“Out of the way house.....It implies the Russians made the call.”

“Maybe, but I know you hate assumptions.” Said Mara.

Villand smiled at her and Mara smiled back. The Russian were learning, informing the authorities guaranteed quick coverage by the media. It was part of the psychology of war these days, using the media and their click bait coverage of events.

“This effects Ruby and she has been one our best customers, recently.” Said Villand. “No notes or pictures, I want you to see Malou and tell her face to face. As much detail about what Gallaan are doing, as you think is appropriate. Then tell her what we suspect the Russians are up to. Malou is no fool, she’ll know most of it. Do it today, treat it as a priority.”

“I will, I’ll go right away.” Said Mara.

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Sarah knew she’d fall off the high climb, as soon as she’d seen it. Not so much a self-fulfilling prophecy, as knowing herself really well. If there was something that she really had to do, she’d screw it up. Sarah was better now than in her twenties, but on a bad day, she’d could still fuck things up like no one else she knew. Tests and exams brought out her screw it up personal demon and to her.....The assault course felt an exam, a huge end of year exam. Spider was there to cheer her on, she’d have given him a few bruises if he hadn’t been. Encouragement at key times was a boyfriend essential, everyone knew that.

“You’re strong, light and agile.” Said Spider. “I can see you hitting close to six minutes.”

“Don’t say that, I’ll probably break an ankle now.” She muttered.

Spider knew her and had reached the point where she was sure he ignored the worst of her comments, when she was having a bad day. He hugged her, which was very nice. The Russian trainer tutted when Spider kissed her, but that was very nice too. A quickie in the locker room would have completely settled her nerves, though she doubted if they’d have waited that long.

“I’ll start the timer when you enter the first obstacle.” Said the trainer.

Small and wiry, she was made for the tunnel made out of large bore plastic pipes. Sarah had stopped examining her naked body in the mirror every morning, though she still gave herself a good look over on Saturday mornings. More wrinkles than in her twenties, but no more body fat than she'd had at nineteen. A lot of her woes were in her mind, she knew that. Similarly, she knew the pipe tunnel was something she could beat everyone's time at, so she did.

"Yay, come on Sarah.....You can do it."

Yelled Spider, as she hurtled towards the next piece of apparatus. It was the small wall, which had ruined a few people's times. It wobbled, Spider had talked about that, a lot.

"Hit it high and keep going." Shouted Lily.

Nice to have a noisy gang of fans, it really helped. Sarah leapt at the wall, moving her hands in a climbing motion, while was still in the air. It worked, she was over the small wall, before consciously being aware if was there.

"Wow, you're killing the times !" Shouted Spider.

Sarah ran on autopilot, as though she was running for the bus, or trying to get home in time for dinner. She knew her times were good, yet the only piece of apparatus she was aware of, was number fifteen out of eighteen. As the huge thirty-foot wall arrived in front of her, it was as though her brain turned fully on again.

"Don't hesitate.....Up and over Sarah." Yelled Lily.

"Just keep moving.....You can do this." Added Spider.

Sophie was there too, though if Sophie was in the mood for a quiet day, she rarely said a word. Sarah caught Sophie watching her, as she leapt at the ropes and wooden rungs, that everyone dreaded climbing.

"I have to do this, or they won't let me use a weapon." Sarah muttered to herself.

Those were the rules and Ruby claimed to be sticking to them. Take over seven minutes to cover the course and it was unlikely you'd be allowed in the assault team on the island. No place meant no weapons, no real part in the battle. Not that Sarah wanted an assault rifle. She still had a thing about old, heavy revolvers. Large bore of course, a forty-five with a pocket full of speed loaders was her idea of gun heaven. Sarah leapt up the wall and miracle of miracles, her feet found ropes and rungs right where she needed them.

"Go on.....Do it." Shouted Spider.

Almost at the top and it happened, the thing she was certain would happen. Her hand found the top, but refused to grab a rope. Thirty feet up, high enough to cause her serious injury and she was falling. Nothing to grab onto, she was beginning to topple over backwards.

"Keep going, Sarah." Yelled Lily.

No use, she was falling and it was going to hurt when she hit the floor, hurt a lot. Sarah didn't want to think too much about it, but from that high onto her head.....It was bad, really bad. There was padding on the floor, but not much of it and not everywhere it might be needed.

"Fuck." Sarah mumbled.

Her body did the impossible, completely outside her usual experience with falling. Sarah moved up a little and forward, until her fingers grasped a rope. Such a relief to not be crippled or dying, it gave her new impetus. Over the wall and fast down the other side. Sarah was on the ground before she saw Sophie, smiling at her. Sarah had no problem with cheating, especially if it saved her from almost certain pain and injury. She smiled back at Sophie and carried on running. Her final time wasn't as good as it could have been.

"I have your time as six minutes and twenty seconds." Said the trainer.

“Well done, I’m proud if you.” Said Spider.

No one would ever know Sophie had used her whammy to push her back towards the wall, not even Spider. No one in the world likes a cheat, it was one of those universal rules. Sarah didn’t care, it meant she could take a fuck-off sized revolver into battle.

“I heard a bit of a commotion.” Said Ruby. “Impossible not to come over and congratulate you.”

“There was a moment.....But I did it.” Said Sarah.

Had Sophie helped her, or was it Ruby ? There were numerous other wunderkinds in the hangar, it could have been any of them. As always, Ruby’s expression was giving nothing away.

“Keep fit, Sarah.” Said Ruby. “It’s a long walk from Lima to Machu Picchu. With a steep climb at the end, or so I’ve been told.”

“So, we’re definitely going ?” Asked Sarah.

“Yes, once this problem has been sorted out, we’re definitely going.”

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