

Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

Chapter 10 - Penny

“Breakfast was good, it always was. Olga’s old house had been infamous when it came to food. She used to send one of her guys out to buy burgers and coffee, for breakfast. The live in cook probably wasn’t cheap, but worth every euro.”

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~ Then ~

~ Varna, Bulgaria, in simpler times with Jurgis ~

Jurgis woke up, just in time to see Ruby wince as she pulled on her jeans. Both of them had been hurt, a lot more than just bruises. Why she and Olga had decided to try and kill each other was still a mystery. He might have let them keep their secrets, if they hadn’t returned without his merchandise. At least they hadn’t lost his money, or he might have given them a scar each, to remind them to be more careful next time.

“Don’t rush off, we need to talk.” He said.

“Not again.....I keep telling you.” Said Ruby. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

She’d always smart mouthed him a little, sometimes in front of his men. He usually laughed and put it down to, ‘the little kitten has a few claws.’ He grabbed her shoulder as she tried to open their bedroom door.

“No, you owe me a proper explanation..... And our client still needs the merchandise.” He said.

“Merchandise.....Drugs probably.” Shouted Ruby. “Calling it merchandise doesn’t make your business any cleaner.”

Jurgis loved her hair, the darkness of it, the feel of it as he ran his fingers through it. He was angry though, as he grabbed her hair and pulled.

“Let go.....”

No being gentle anymore, he heard some of her hair break, as he dragged her across the room.

There was an old armchair in the corner of the room, currently home to about twenty pairs of Ruby’s jeans. He pushed her down, shoving her down once he’d let go of her hair.

“Now..... Sit there until I say you can go.”

“Bastard.”

Still that wilfulness, that defiance. It was one of the reasons why he loved her. There was a time and a place for everything though and her defiance was beginning to annoy him. Ruby was crying a little, or he might have slapped her face.

“The first time Ruby, the first fucking time I let the two of you go somewhere alone. You both come back looking as though you went five rounds with Muhammad Ali. All sorts of whispers from the people in Tallinn, about Olga trying to kill you.”

He stopped mid-tirade and gently stroked her cheek.

“You missed the pickup and the merchandise wasn’t drugs. It was medical supplies, very expensive and hard to obtain medical supplies. I can send someone else to collect them, and of course Olga will have to go away for a while.....I might send her to work for Tobor for a few months. If anyone can calm the bitch down, it’s Tobor. What am I to do with you though Ruby, tell me that ?”

“You can’t send Olga away.....I won’t let you !” She screamed at him.

Jurgis slapped her hard, all the strength in his right arm behind it. It happened when he was angry, he realised his gun was in his hand. No finger on the trigger, the safety catch still on. Ruby hated guns though, so he hoped it might finally make her stop giving him shit.

“Do you want me to kill you.... Is that it ?” He asked her.

He had the gun right in her face, though he had no intention of using it. She’d know that of course, that was half the problem. Her ability to look into his head meant she knew exactly how far to press his buttons.

“No more..... That’s the last time you’ll hit me.” Said Ruby.

He hadn’t meant to hit her again; she should have known that. He’d been putting his hand out to touch her cheek, it looked so red. By the next morning the whole side of her face would be swollen. He was going to apologise and promise not to do it again. He’d given her his word before though, several times.

“Fuck !” He shouted.

It was as if he’d been picked up by a small hurricane. A hot hurricane, perhaps even fiery. By the time he collided with the frame of their bed, he could smell the skin burning on parts of his chest. Jurgis cried out, as his left hip hit the solid hardwood bedframe. He had to smile at Ruby though, he was actually quite proud of her. Some might call what they had a toxic relationship, but life with Ruby was never boring.

“It seems our little kitten has some new..... Sharper claws.” He said. “Is that something you’ve done before, or is it new ?”

No answer, she sat looking at him, as though ready to pounce. Jurgis had dropped his gun, it was part of a collection of flotsam in front of Ruby’s dressing table. The entire bedroom looked trashed. He took a chance and slowly got to his feet.

“Christ Ruby, your face.....I never meant to.....”

“That’s the last time.....I’m not sure what I did, but next time you might get incinerated.”

He hadn’t dressed, his bare chest looked as though a dozen cigarettes had been stubbed out on it.

“Never again Ruby, you have my word..... I’ll never hit you again.”

“You’ve given your word before.”

He took a chance, giving her a lopsided grin.

“I know I have, but you’ve never threatened to incinerate me before.”

“True.” She replied.

It was hard work, limping back to her, as she sat on the pile of jeans in the chair. His hip hurt even more as he sat next to her in the chair, before wriggling to make a little extra room. Ruby helped by wriggling too, until they just about fitted into the old chair. He hugged her and felt relieved when she hugged him back.

“You’re not going to move out or anything are you ?” He asked.

“Not if you keep your word.”

He kissed her cheek, feeling the heat in his lips. Ruby let him kiss her, a proper kiss. The sort of kiss the kids called eating face. They ended up forehead against forehead.

“Olga will need to go away, but only for a while. I can’t have you guys trying for a rematch.” He said.

“Two months with Tobor, maybe three, then she can come back. Does that meet with your approval ?”

“Alright.”

“You can forget about the merchandise; I’ll pick it up myself.”

“No, I want to pick it up, it matters to me. Let me choose two men to go with me and I’ll pick it up.”

“On your own.....Again Ruby. I’m not sure.....”

“I need to do it Jurgis. I need to prove to you that I’m not a total fuckup...And I need to prove it to myself.”

“Fine..... Fine....Just choose who you need and get it done.” He said.

Another kiss, and Ruby pushed herself against his chest.

“Careful, the burns still hurt.... What the hell did you do to me ?”

“I’m not sure, it was just supposed to be a powerful wind. The fire parts just sort of happened.”

“Get it right and that could be useful.” He said.

“No, I’d never use it to hurt anyone.”

“You hurt me.”

“That’s different..... You’re an arsehole.”

She made him laugh, even if she wasn’t always intending to. The wounds on his chest looked nasty and he knew they’d hurt like hell before they healed.

“You’ll use it all Ruby, the wind, the fire and anything else you can do.”

“No, I never will.”

“I guarantee you will. If someone is threatening those you care for, you’ll use it all. If you only remember one thing I tell you, remember this. Kitten’s claws are meant to be used, that’s why they have them. Put it in your journal or something, with today’s date. Jurgis said that a kitten only has claws for one reason..... To use them.”

“I’ll remember Jurgis..... I promise you I’ll remember.”

Ruby never had put anything Jurgis told her in a journal, but she did remember most of it. She’d come to hate him towards the end and that had worried her. Deep down though, how much she’d loved him, worried her even more.

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Late, it was after nine in the evening and she still had various documents to check and sign off. If anyone had asked her, Penny Green would have said she knew the precise moment when George had decided to make her CEO of the Polandrous Foundation. Just the UK company with the London office, but the bulk of their business was still in London. Other financial institutions may have moved to Europe, but not Polandrous. George had expanded the portfolio of the Paris office. He’d told her that London was his home though and his one key instruction to her had been;

“Never move the key business out of London, Penny.”

Probably about eighty percent business sense and twenty percent nostalgia, though she would respect his wishes.

The moment she’d known she’d be running the place one day, was when George had given her the corner office. It was ‘the’ corner office, the best in the building, the one with the sensational view of the Shard. Penny had kept her corner office, even though the big office on the top floor was now officially hers. There was even her name on the door, ‘Penny Green CEO.’ George came in occasionally though and to be honest, she loved that view out of her wonderful corner office. Her phone gave the warbling sound it gave when the automatic building security got agitated by something. Not the phone on her desk, it sent messages to her mobile. It seemed to get anxious once every couple of months, always over something trivial.

‘Main entrance not secure – Yellow Warning.’

The damn thing had given a full red alert when a pigeon had managed to get inside. Yes, it could have been a terrorist group setting off every sensor on the second floor, but it wasn’t, it had been a

pigeon. Penny thought there wasn't much chance of computers taking over the world if they couldn't tell the difference between a bunch of armed terrorists and a single frightened pigeon. Two minibuses full of police had arrived to deal with that red alert and they hadn't been happy about it. Penny still reacted the way she'd been taught though, just in case.

"Never ignore the AI system." The IT people had told her. "The alert you ignore will be the one that's real."

A hotkey to bring the main items of worry up on her PC. The three CCTV feeds that showed the foyer came up and one of them showed that the front doors were ever so slightly ajar. That never happened ever, at least not any more. One night security guy had left the doors ajar to pop out for chips. Three homeless guys had been enjoying the comfortable seating in the waiting area, when he'd returned. After that, the entire system had been upgraded, as had the night guards. They were all ex-coppers now, most recommended by Foxy and his people.

"Shit.....Shit." Muttered Penny. "What do I.....Yes, check the security room."

Tempting to override the tannoy system and shout a little, she always found yelling quite cathartic. She could ask where the hell Dylan had got to and why the front doors were open. Dangerous though, it could tell the bad guys she was in the building. If there were bad guys and not another bloody pigeon. Penny has to think about it, but she was soon looking at the interior of the security office on the third floor.

"Fuck." She muttered.

The camera looked from the back of the room, so she couldn't see the face of the man lying over the desk. One of theirs, though there were only two guards at night and they were both in uniform. Better than it had been, one on night duty had been the norm for years. The man over the desk was smaller than Dylan, probably the new guy. Peter she thought, though she might have got his name wrong. The damn AI had noticed an open door, but not one of the guards being flung over a desk, before his wrists had been duct taped. Unless of course, they had Dylan's set of keys.

"Damn.....Please be alright." She muttered.

A guard had died during a previous night time incident. An attack by the rogues Ruby had been at war with, had left them with a dead guard and the need for a brand-new security system. Not that George had ever called it an attack, it was official an incident. Everything up to the fourth floor was easily accessible. Everything above that was a super secure area. Even the guards needed to be granted access by her, if was after normal office hours.

'Unauthorised attempt to use elevator C.'

"What the hell are they after ?" She mumbled.

Fear brought back the training, she panned one of the foyer cameras around and then zoomed it at what looked like a pile of clothing. It was Dylan, the night security manager. She couldn't see his wrists, but she'd have bet a month's pay on them being duct taped. Seeing him trussed up was dreadful for several reasons, but mainly because it meant she was now alone.

No dialling 999, she had a better and more reliable way of shouting for help. An app on her phone that consisted of a large red button and just one 'are you sure ?' Foxy's people had set it up for George, a way of calling the men with the right experience and serious weapons. At one time they'd been known as the men from Chelsea barracks, but they'd probably moved by now. After pressing the panic button, her phone brought back a reply almost instantly.

'On our way.'

Great, she just had to sit and wait. The elevators wouldn't go past the fourth floor and the stairwell had doors tough enough to resist just about anything. Or at least they should have been able to resist just about everything.

'Fifth floor - Failure of stairwell door – Red Alert.'

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Buying a laptop had been a good idea. The whole process of boarding a plane seemed designed to be irritating, but no one had looked twice at her shiny new laptop. Eugenie had looked at the data stolen from Gallaan, though that kind of corporate information wasn't her area of expertise. Olga would understand it all and the implications. If Olga hadn't run a criminal empire, she'd have probably been the CEO of a large multinational. If expert help were needed, Olga had a whole arsenal of lawyers and accountants she could call on. Eugenie was currently lying in bed with Lorenzo, watching the bedside clock head towards seven in the morning. It seemed slow when she watched it, yet it hurtled along every time she closed her eyes. Her hand hit the stop button the instant the alarm went off. Eugenie had missed Lol, she'd missed him a lot. She leant towards him and kissed his lips.

"Wake up, we're having breakfast with Olga." She said. "She's even invited Flex to join us."

"Oh, him."

How would she have reacted to Lol going away with a woman neither of them really knew? Probably with the same sour mood Lol had developed. They'd had the whole extended 'he's just a colleague,' discussion the previous evening. She'd been tired after the journey from Paris and probably hadn't handled it that well. It just kept crossing her mind, that if the situation was reversed, she'd probably have been pretty fucking angry. After all, they were supposed to be having a romantic time in Budapest. She sat on his edge of the bed and it was so tempting to use the fluence on him, as Spider called it. All the anger and sour moods would vanish, but so would the real Lol. She'd never know if he really cared for her, or if it was all because of her gifts. No, she was determined to never be that insecure.

"It was probably a bad idea to go to Paris with Flex." She said. "He may end up being one of Olga's gang, the new man on the team. He will never be the man in my life though. I'm not sure what you and I have Lol, not yet. I do know it's important to me. Can we get back to our romantic working holiday?"

"Yes, of course we can.....If Olga ever lets you have a day off."

"I think we need to go out tonight, without telling her."

"A damned good idea." Said Lol.

Showering and dressing took some time, there was the constant temptation to touch each other. Touching led to other things and it was close to eight by the time they arrived for breakfast with Olga.

"You're both late, but I'll forgive you." Said Olga.

Flex was there and Olga had the laptop open, while she sipped at her coffee. Eugenie hoped that Flex would remember that as far as Lorenzo was concerned, she was just an ordinary human female. She had given him a thorough briefing on the plane, covering what could and couldn't be discussed.

"We appear to have enough information to shut down Gallaan." Said Flex. "Probably enough to put most of their board behind bars too."

"A few politicians might have a few awkward questions to answer." Said Olga. "I'm no expert, but I have a few tame lawyers who are. It would seem Gallaan have been obtaining state of the art

weapons by bribery and then selling them to organisations and governments who definitely aren't on the approved list of any western government."

"It's huge, an illegal trade worth billions." Said Flex.

Eugenie kissed Olga on the cheek, while Lol looked a bit stunned. He had no real idea why she'd gone to Paris. He'd probably assumed it was something to do with narcotics, or something to do with one of the other arms of Olga's empire. Eugenie was reaching for the coffee pot, when a servant beat her to it. Olga's new lifestyle would take some getting used to, but it had its good points.

"Wow, that does sound huge." Said Lol. "Are you taking the information to the police?"

"I've asked my legal people to come over and take a look." Said Olga. "They've been with me for years and won't leak the information to anyone. I might also ask the lady who looks after my finances. I suspect Gallaan may be into good old-fashioned fraud, on top of selling arms to the wrong people."

"Are there right people to sell guns to?" Asked Lol.

"Ahh, a very philosophical question." Said Olga. "Too heavy for something discussed over breakfast. I know I've rather monopolised your time, Eugenie. Today I will lend you my car and my driver. He's very good, he knows all the favourite places the tourists like to see. Borrow him, have fun....That's an order. We'll discuss what my legal people think when you get back."

"Can I come too?" Asked Flex.

"No, definitely not....Twos company and all that." Said Eugenie.

Breakfast was good, it always was. Olga's old house had been infamous when it came to food. She used to send one of her guys out to buy burgers and coffee, for breakfast. The live in cook probably wasn't cheap, but worth every euro. After breakfast, Lol went to change for their trip around the city, giving Eugenie a few minutes to talk to Olga.

"I can't keep self-censoring." Said Olga. "You have to either tell Lorenzo the truth, or send him home."

"Then what Olga, break up with him and accept a life on my own? No, I've seen the others who've had children by human fathers. They switch off their gifts, or at least try to. Where are they now, why aren't they helping Ruby? It seems the accepted wisdom is that you're either a wunderkind and lonely, or you pretend to be totally human. I won't do either of those, there has to be a better way."

"Do you love him?" Asked Olga.

"To be honest I don't know. I'm not even sure how you're supposed to know. I like being around him and miss him when he's not there. But is that love? It all seems so complicated."

"Love is physical, Eugenie." Said Olga. "It's visceral, you feel it in your guts. Do you get that feeling when you're with him?"

"Sometimes..... Sophie has an attitude about love that I can relate to. Without a definition of love, which she can check against facts, it doesn't really exist. Of course, that doesn't stop her falling in love and getting her guts ripped out. She even decided it was because all guys are bastards. She fell for a woman and of course, got her guts ripped out again."

"But at least there was no chance of her getting pregnant." Said Olga.

Eugenie had to laugh; Charlie had made much the same comment.

"Yes, you have a point, Olga. I need to tell Lol everything or break up with him and to be truthful, I haven't decided which it will be." Said Eugenie. "Can you delay the meeting, move it from when we get back to just before dinner? By then I'll have either told Lol, or he'll be packing to go home."

“Yes, that’s fine. Don’t end up on your own, Eugenie. I never intended to be single forever; it just sort of happened. If you choose that life, fine. Just don’t let it happen by accident.”

“I won’t Olga.”

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Penny had one huge advantage over whoever had invaded the building. She could use the elevators and the security system still obeyed her commands. There were people on the way to help her, but she still needed to look after her own safety, as best she could. During the previous incident, the intruders had shut everything down that wasn’t essential. They’d also quickly gained control of the building. There were backup systems now though and backups to those system. A new alternative power supply had been set up, which would come online if any bad guys tried to cut off the power from the mains. Everything considered, George and her had tried to plan for every eventuality.

‘Sixth Floor – Stair well door failing – Red Alert.’

Silly to do it, Penny knew seeing them would only add to her fear. She selected the camera that looked at the sixth-floor area of the stairwell. There they were, three large men in the obligatory dark clothing. Masks too, they didn’t want their faces to be filmed and recorded. One was pointing at the door, while the other two used sledgehammers. Hardly high-tech, but with a lot of hard work, they’d get past the door.

“What the fuck do they want ?” She muttered to herself.

Penny set the system to act on its own, which was what it had been doing. There was a panic room, of a sorts. The people who’d designed it hadn’t been happy. Normally such rooms were in a solid part of the building, preferably the ground floor or a nice solid basement. George had accepted that a panic room behind his office wasn’t ideal, but it seemed the best place to put it. At the time he was the one working long hours, so it made sense to give him the panic room.

“Not an ideal part of the building, but we’ll do what we can.”

The man from the panic room installers had told them. There wouldn’t be the usual heavy walls, explosives could be an issue. To Penny, if someone was blowing walls up to get to you, you’d be in trouble no matter where the panic room had been built. The construction had been looked at by some of Foxy’s advisers on such matters. They’d said the panic room was better than not having one at all. It sounded as though they were being rude, which probably hadn’t been intended. The panic room was on the top floor and the elevator to get there only obeyed two people after normal business hours, George and her.

“To hell with it, time to get locked in.” Penny muttered.

It felt like leaving safety, coming out of her wonderful corner office. In truth the hardened glass walls wouldn’t slow down anyone who seriously wanted to hurt her. The elevator knew her, it had all of her biometrics on file. When they’d had it done it had felt like a huge intrusion into her privacy. Now she viewed it as an essential in keeping her safe. No keypad that could be hacked, no dongle that could be cloned. She pressed the top floor button and the lift took her there. The worrying thing was hearing hammering as she came out of the lift. It would take them time to get through every door though and last time the people with training and guns had arrived fairly quickly. George’s office door opened when she pulled it. It wouldn’t open for them, whoever they were. Toughened glass again, like her office. It wouldn’t slow them down for long.

“Bastards.” She muttered.

Behind the desk was a set of bookshelves. She pressed the right end of a shelf, before pushing the whole thing to one side. Not that hard to move, the bookshelves were on runners. She needed a dongle to open the panic room door, it was an independent system to the rest of the building. Extra

security to make sure it couldn't be hacked or have its firmware hijacked. She liked the reassuring rumble as the heavy door opened.

"Best we can do with the weight the building structure will take."

The installer had told George and her. It looked a pretty solid door to her. Unless of course the intruders had brought explosives. Penny tried not to think about the panic room as a trap, but it was hard not to. The invaders would know where she was, it was the only place left.

"Help will be here soon." She muttered.

Penny entered the panic room and pressed the close button on the wall. The door rumbled and made a slight clang as it locked itself. She was safe, or as safe as she could be, given the circumstances.

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Ruby knew Kallina and Max had the potential to be huge assets, or she wouldn't have made so much effort to add them to her team. Two strong personalities, they'd tried to bully her into accepting their ideas. Not that Ruby was having any of that, she gave them the full ten-minute version of her we're not a democracy speech. Ruby had the huge advantage that even if they didn't like her ideas, it was her war and her small army. At the end of the day the wunderkinds and assorted humans would follow her across the globe, not Kallina and definitely not Max.

"You're going to war against an enemy you know to be incredibly dangerous." Max had said. "It makes sense to go in well prepared."

"We'll definitely need better weapons than we can carry." Kallina had added.

Max had wanted a full-scale seaborne invasion of whatever part of Norway the rogues had chosen as their base. It had sounded like a re-enactment of D Day, right down to several hundred heavily armed soldiers.

"We can hire mercenaries." Max had said. "Expensive, but it's not as if you don't have the money." Ruby remembered Max hiring mercenaries when he was stalking her across Eastern Europe. They'd been enemies then and Max had hired an entire team of ex-special ops fighters from across the globe. From what she remembered none of them had lived to receive their final pay. Max treated mercs as totally expendable. Plus, at least one of them would tell everyone they knew about the strange group of super people who'd hired them.

Kallina had wanted a repeat of North Korea, using the concentrated forces of nature against the rogues. Parts of the North Korean geography had been changed forever and an idyllic bay destroyed. Ruby didn't want that, anymore than she wanted D Day Mark II. A realist though, Ruby knew she had to accept a few of their ideas to keep them fully motivated. Yes, there would be better weapons, but no huge invasion. As for extra help; that she'd arrange with Foxy and his contacts. There'd even be a place and time for Kallina to rain down lightning on their enemies, and anything else she might fancy. It would all be properly controlled though and it had to happen fast. In and out in less than a day had been agreed by all three of them. Norway had its own armed forces after all and the rest of the world would take an interest. The major nations would have satellites repositioned to see what was going on, after the first huge explosion.

"We can't be involved in a fight with any nation's army." Ruby had said.

Everyone had agreed to that. Even Monique had solemnly nodded her head. Ruby had left Max discussing details with Kallina and two of his best people. He was going to go a little too far, she'd already allowed for that. It was her job now; she'd almost fallen into the role of a medieval monarch. She was the figurehead, while her generals organised and fought the war.

"I feel sorry for Norway." She mumbled.

Charlotte and Sophie were training Abe, with a fairly large audience watching them. Everyone was bored and watching Abe crush various objects, set them alight, or do weird unintended things. It had become quite a daily event. He'd even managed to give a tin can a purple colour, though no one knew how. It seemed Abe had outdone himself, but not everyone was pleased.

"Sophie pointed and told me to crush it." Said Abe.

"I meant the empty cooking oil drum, not the dumpster." Said Sophie.

"It wasn't his fault." Said Calaso.

Charlie was laughing, as were quite a few of Abe's audience. The purple tin can had gained a lot of applause but this.....The dumpster was still full, though it was taking up a lot less space than it had.

"We should bury it outside the compound." Said Charlie. "We'll say nothing about it and they'll think someone stole it during the night."

"No one steals dumpsters.....At least not full ones." Said Ruby.

"Oh, it stinks worse now." Said Spider. "I'm all for burying it."

Hot weather with high humidity, perfect for growing bacteria on kitchen waste. An off-white liquid was oozing out of the bottom of the dumpster. The stench was the main problem though, as the metal sides tried to hold several days' worth of garbage, and failed.

"Charlie could incinerate the whole thing." Said Anna.

"Yeah, I can do that." Agreed Charlie.

"No, we'll un-crush it." Said Ruby. "It'll be good training for Abe. A buckled dumpster is better than a missing one, just."

"I think it's beyond repair." Said Sophie.

"Nonsense.....Come on Abe, we'll do this together." Said Ruby. "It doesn't need to be perfect; it is just a large dustbin after all. Come here, stand beside me."

Ruby examined the dumpster, from a distance. Getting close would mean getting a nose full of the stench, which might lodge in her sinuses for hours, maybe days. It had to be roughly the right shape and the top had to close. It also had to be picked up by the truck that emptied it, so the slots on the sides had to be aligned, even if a little roughly aligned. Every dumpster she'd ever seen had been bent and dented, there had to be an allowance for that in the design.

"Ready, Abe?" She asked.

"It wasn't his fault." Repeated Calaso.

"I'm not blaming anyone, we can un-crush it." Said Ruby. "Close your eyes Abe and imagine you're inside the dumpster. You're right in the middle, crushed up against all that stinking mess. Are you in there, can you smell it?"

"Yes, it's awful."

"Avoid the used condoms." Said Anna.

"And the remains of yesterday's lamb tagine." Added Sarah.

"That's it, imagine it all, Abe." Said Ruby. "All the rotting leftovers, the used condoms. See it all and know you can get out of there. See a huge cockroach wanting to climb over your face. Now push outwards, un-crush that dumpster."

"Yeah, un-crush the fucker." Yelled Anna.

For a first try at something many might think impossible, Abe did alright. The basic shape was all over the place, but the overall size was about right. The rear left corner was still scrunched up, so Ruby used her own gifts to pop it out.

"Good, good." She said. "Now you need a good steady push to get the shape back. Get inside again and push evenly outward. Use your power to push, not punch. Got that?"

“Yes, Ruby. Push not punch, I understand.” Said Abe.

She heard something give as the dumpster popped out into about the right shape. Ruby helped, pulling and pushing at the areas that still needed attention. When she’d finished, it was time to get close and examine their efforts.

“Sophie, see if the top opens.” She said.

It did, though the fit was far from perfect. That would do though, the dumpster behind the supermarket in Hackney looked far worse. The sound she’d heard was the metal splitting slightly along one edge. Again, it wasn’t a piece of precise engineering, it was a thing to hold rotting garbage. Charlie was eyeing the metal slots where the truck picked up the bin.

“Well.....I reckon it’ll be alright for a pickup.” Said Charlie. “But they’re definitely going to notice that someone has fucked up their dumpster.”

“Alright, we’re at that point.” Said Ruby. “We now move somewhere else to carry on with the training and pretend we know nothing about what happened.”

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There was one camera in George’s old office, which fed into the panic room. It also did sound, so in theory at least, she’d see and hear what was going on. The camera wasn’t that well-hidden though, another design flaw they’d had to live with. Penny turned the volume up until she just about heard the hammering in the stairwell. It might take them a little longer, but eventually they would get to her. Where were her gallant rescuers ? It hadn’t actually been that long, but when it was a matter of life or death..... They’d have been at home of course, the hard characters who served the country in time of need. They’d need to be called, assembled, equipped and finally pointed in her direction. It all took time; nothing was ever instant. Especially in a twenty-four-hour, busy city like London.

“They’ll be here.” She muttered.

Her phone kept receiving notifications as they gradually headed up the building. Penny sat in front of the screen and in one of those weird things it’s hard to explain later, she fell asleep. It had been a hell of a long day and everyone handles stress differently. She’d fallen asleep in the hospital waiting room on the night her mum had died. The nurse had woken her and been very kind. It was that nurse who’d used the words.

“Everyone handles stress differently.”

Penny woke up when the intruders entered George’s old office, complete with several bags of heavy equipment. The noise had woken her, the volume was still set on high. She lowered the volume and watched the men who were so keen to get to her. Actually, the one getting settled at the computer looked female. It was so hard to tell in the bulky dark clothing, but yes, it was a woman. They all had weapons, most had what looked like assault rifles.

“You won’t have any luck trying to get into the system.” Muttered Penny.

The small man she’d seen in the stairwell, was still pointing at things and giving orders. He was telling two of the men to move the heavy desk George had always loved. It was strange that they seemed to be settling in.

“They must know I’ll have sent for help.”

Not that Penny knew why they might want her, she was only.....Actually she no longer was a humble PA. She was the CEO, with share options and a really nice car in the underground car park. More importantly she was a signatory, known to all the banks used by the Polandrous Foundation. Was that it, were they going to demand a ransom for her ? They had to catch her first.

“I know you can hear me in there.”

The small guy, looking straight into the camera. The walls were reasonably solid, the air piped in through filters. Her power supply had no less than four backups. Nowhere was completely impregnable, but it'd take them a long time to force their way in.

"I have orders to bring you to someone who is very keen on talking to you. If that proves to be impossible, I have other orders.....Show the lady the contents of the bag."

A man unzipped a bag and showed her what could have been anything. Lots of slabs of something brownish wrapped in thin layers of plastic. Probably explosives, a huge amount of explosives. If it hadn't been explosives, there was no point in showing her. Penny was also certain they were there to kill her. Open the door and they'd shoot her, a confirmed kill. Set the explosives and detonate them once they were outside and it would be an assumed kill. Either way, someone wanted her dead. It'd be something to do with Ruby of course, such things usually were.

"Oh, that girl.....All the trouble she got George into and now it's my turn."

The man outside was pointing again, as his people pushed explosive into somewhere she couldn't see. Probably all those explosives were being put against the wall where they could see the panic room door. The pointy guy confirmed that and more besides.

".....and they'll probably find you somewhere in Farringdon...."

Penny wasn't interested, she had no intention of opening the door. There was sound of a shot and pointy guy was staring to his left. The woman at the computer appeared to fall over, until Penny heard someone yelling about Anne being shot. There was a bright flash and Penny was left looking at a blank screen.

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