

## Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

### Chapter 2 - Landen

**“Nari ended up at London City Airport by tossing a coin to decide. Random choices are impossible for a pursuer to predict.”**

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Eugenie had made the first few contacts with Gérard Villand and his people, she was the real expert on them. She'd even managed to obtain a deal with Villand for his services, although he'd never agreed to work only for Ruby. It seemed Eugenie was in love though; with an Italian man she'd met in Milan. She'd have answered Ruby's summons if pushed, but Ruby had decided to leave Eugenie to enjoy her romance.

“Villand has information, he called Malou.” Ruby had told her. “I want you to deal with him now Charlie. Take Sophie with you, he'll like Sophie.....Everyone likes Sophie.”

Charlotte wondered if Ruby had given her the job, because she realised, she'd been using Villand and his people to find information for her ? Of course she did, Ruby knew everything. Charlotte was with Sophie, walking through the narrow streets of Paris on a warm sunny day. Such a day and on foot, was by far the best way to see the city.

“What is Villand like ?” Asked Sophie. “I've never met him, but Eugenie said he can be a bit fierce.”

“So, my dear Sophie, you know I've been paying him for information ?”

“Of course I do, everyone does.” Said Sophie. “No one minds by the way. You have your own business to run now. So.....What is he like ?”

“Old, older than Methuselah. He was with the DGSE in the old days, when France still had ambitions in North Africa. He can be fierce, but his information is always accurate, always. He has a knack of picking the right people to join his group.”

“Eugenie said he uses young street people.” Said Sophie. “Why do they work for him ?”

“Why do we all come running when Ruby asks us to drop everything ?”

“Well..... She's Ruby isn't she.”

“Precisely Sophie and Villand is a very charismatic man. Some of the people he uses are illegals of one kind or another, but not all of them. He offers people a home, something many of them have never had. He gives them a sense of belonging to.....A family. We're being picked up by Mara. You'll see what I mean.”

“What is she like ?” Asked Sophie.

“A dark-haired woman from North Africa, probably Algeria. She's likely to take over when Villand can no longer run things. She talks about Villand as though he was her grandfather, mixed in with her favourite saint.”

“Like a cult.”

“Yes Sophie, they are a bit like a cult.”

Mara was waiting in a Lexus about a mile away from the hotel. No being bounced around in several cars, they were one of Villand's top clients. Mara would take them straight there, wherever there was. Villand moved around a lot, it was rumoured every few days. Always to yet another tatty looking shop or office, where he'd run his business until moving again.

“Hi Mara.” Said Charlie.

"Hi Charlotte. I see you brought a new friend."

"This is Sophie."

Eugenie had talked about how her first meeting with Villand, had involved hours of being driven around Paris. Mara took less than half an hour, to get them to a grubby shopfront in Montreuil, in the eastern suburbs of Paris. Always a grubby and anonymous looking building for Villand, he probably rented them by the dozen.

"Here we are, go straight in. Aria will be waiting inside." Said Mara.

The shop door made a grinding sound as Charlie opened it. The shop probably hadn't seen a customer come through the door in a while. Aria was waiting for them, a girl who'd joined Villand's family to escape a depressing cycle of drugs and abuse. His people were all like that, they were all trying to escape from something.

"Straight through to the back, he's expecting you." Said Aria.

Always the same desk and chairs, he must have them moved from building to building, in the middle of the night. Charlotte sat down without waiting for an invite. Sophie leant against a wall and lurked, it was one of her new things, lurking.

"Charlotte.....I have this on Ruby's account." Said Villand.

"I'm just picking it up for her."

"No Eugenie today?" He asked.

"She's in love." Said Sophie

"Oh, poor girl."

He was old, Eugenie talked about him having bad days, when his wrinkles had wrinkles and he seemed to have trouble breathing. Ruby said he had to be close to ninety, but there was nothing wrong with his mind. It was obviously a good day; his voice was strong and clear. Villand shoved a thin A4 file across the desk at her.

"That's all the information my people turned up, what there is of it." He said. "They're trying too hard to be invisible, putting far too much effort into being hidden. The local street people notice that and begin talking about it. The illegal immigrants avoid the area, believing the compound is an immigration services task force. The dealers in recreational drugs, think it's a drug squad base. Everyone doing something illegal has a different idea. It ends up making this compound stand out like a sore thumb, to those who know what to avoid."

"How many are in the compound?" Asked Charlie.

Villand nodded at Aria, his way of telling her it was her time to talk. It had been the same at every meeting she'd had with him, only Mara was allowed to speak without permission.

"About a dozen, they look like guards." Said Aria. "I went to Landen and talked to the local kids. They're scared of the compound, the guards all look really tough."

"I'm sure Charlotte and her friends can handle themselves." Said Villand.

"Any clue who they really are?" Asked Sophie.

"Sorry, they could be anyone." Said Villand. "We could do some digging through property records in Landen, but that will take a while. Even then, if they're using off shore shell companies...."

"I suppose we'll find out when we get there." Said Sophie.

Ruby was picking up the bill as part of her regular deal with Villand, so there was no other business. On the way out, Aria whispered at them, as she opened the shop door.

"Be careful, the kids in Landen are scared of these people, really scared."

Charlotte read the file while Mara drove them back. As he'd said, there wasn't much in the way of details, but Ruby had wanted the information quickly, rather than in depth. Villand didn't like his

people being seen near Malou's hotel too often. Mara dropped them off at a Metro Station, two stops from the hotel. It was a nice day, so they decided to walk.

"These people we're up against sound dangerous." Said Sophie. "I know Lau has family business, but we really could use Eugenie."

Charlotte felt the same way. They all had their own gifts and everyone was good in a fight. Sarah and Spider were ordinary humans, but they were both good fighters. As for Anna, she fought like a wild thing. Sometimes Charlie forgot, that Anna was just an ordinary human. No one is safe from a well-trained enemy though, a single bullet in the head and any of them could die.

"Of all the times for her to fall in love." Said Charlie.

"Damned inconsiderate." Muttered Sophie.

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To Spider the drive from Paris felt so different from the first time they'd left Malou's hotel. Ruby had been twenty-two then and now she was twenty-seven. Only five years, but the trip across Europe then had been so different. They were no longer paranoid, hiding from everyone and constantly looking over their shoulders. Ruby was prepared to take a few risks, knowing she had the ability to deal with any unforeseen consequences. Plus of course, there were others with special gifts with them as they headed towards Landen. No buying the worst clunkers the second-hand car dealers had to offer; they were in three hired SUVs. Two would have done for space, but Ruby had learned from events in Mexico.

"If Lily is injured, we'll need space for her to lie down." She'd told them.

The vehicles had been hired on their own driver's licenses; Spider had hired one of them. Ruby had assured him that if a police officer somewhere decided to pull them over for some reason, she could easily put the whammy on them with one of her smiles. Malou had used her contacts to provide them with a few fairly basic, but reliable weapons. Actually, Xue had collected the weapons for Malou. Spider had checked them all and despite not being exactly state of the art, the guns would do their job.

Again a risk, the weapons were in holdalls, mixed in with their piles of bags. They were just a group of tourists in hired vehicles, who was going to give them a second glance? The Ruby from five years ago would never have risked taking guns over a border, even the soft border between France and Belgium. The new Ruby was confident the risk was slight and worth taking and Spider tended to agree with her. They were even booked into a motel on the outskirts of Landen, using their real names. All except Charlotte of course, who was now travelling as Judith Burns, a school teacher from South London.

'Time for a coffee Spider. The first decent place you see.'

Spider was driving the lead vehicle, with Sophie sat next to him, with Sarah somewhere at the back. Sophie was holding his phone up so that he could see Ruby's text. All a huge improvement from five years before, when they'd been too paranoid to use cell phones.

"We're stopping for coffee people." He yelled.

"About time too, we've been on the road for hours." Said Sarah.

They'd been driving for just over an hour out of what was likely to be a four-hour drive, but he wasn't going to argue with her. They were near Roye on the A1 road, that would take them most of the way. Spider's French wasn't brilliant, but the knife and fork on the sign, pretty much told him all he needed to know about Centre Routier Roye. He drove off the main road and parked as close as he could to the restaurant.

"Oh, my knees feel so stiff." Said Sophie.

Once they were all out of the vehicles, they really did look like a group of tourists. All in clothes bought quite cheaply in Paris, they looked like people touring Europe on a budget. Charlotte was no longer a blonde, her hair was now dark brown. Sophie though, had stuck with her red hair. They all followed Ruby into the restaurant, apart from Sophie, who seemed glued to the spot.

“Is there a problem ?” He asked.

“Someone is watching us, though I can’t tell who they are.” She said. “Someone taking far too much interest in us, for it to be just normal curiosity.”

“When have we ever gone anywhere without someone following us ?” He asked.

“It does make it more fun.”

There was something about her smile as she said it. Sophie might only be about five foot two, but he was glad she was on their side.

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Nari was the daughter of Ryöm Kwan, a North Korean scientist of almost legendary fame. People who agree to something quickly, often change their mind just as quickly. She had contacts in the Korean community in South West London and despite her worries, the couple didn’t change their mind about looking after her three-year-old daughter, Seong. Almost strangers, yet she trusted them with her child. It was the way they held her dead father in such awe, almost worshipping him. Seong had never shown any outward sign of any special gifts and even if she did, the couple were unlikely to tell anyone. They were what her father would have called good Koreans.

“Call me on this number if there’s an emergency.” She’d told them.

After that Nari had travelled on false papers, even though she had her own legitimate passport in her pocket. False papers and genuine ones in the same jacket pocket at one point. Spider would have cringed at her amateur street craft, but she had a feeling. Someone was trying to follow her, she knew it. Sometimes they felt quite close, but mostly they seemed to be some way off. Sophie would have understood the idea of feeling that someone was being far too curious about her. Nari ended up at London City Airport by tossing a coin to decide. Random choices are impossible for a pursuer to predict.

“Yes Mrs Taylor, we can get you to Amsterdam via KLM. How will you be paying for your ticket ?”

“Cash.”

Nari wasn’t poor, but she didn’t have Ruby’s seemingly endless resources. The cash would make a hole in her finances, but she didn’t trust her genuine papers anymore, or booking a Eurostar ticket to Paris. Nari was doing what she’d once been very good at, hiding, using a variety of names and keeping to the shadows. As the small KLM plane climbed out of the airport, Nari could no longer feel the watcher.

“My company never said the planes were this small.”

A man next to her, grabbing the back of the seat in front of him as though his life depended on it. Nari usually dreaded nervous flyers, but talking to the man occupied her mind until the plane descended towards Amsterdam. He even gave her a card with his number on it. She had no intention of calling him, but it’s always nice to be asked.

Amsterdam to Landen was a slow three-hour drive, or a two and a half hour fast one. All of it using the A2, which was a decent road if you were in a hurry. She’d intended to steal a car, something bland that no one looked at twice. Her plans changed when she saw the young guy leave his keys in the Ducati motorbike and his crash helmet on the seat. Nari loved all bikes, but the Ducati Panigale V4 was something a bit special. Everything she needed was in a backpack anyway. It was as if fate had brought her to that fantastic machine and shouted ‘enjoy yourself Nari.’

“Oh yes, you’re mine. At least until Landen.” She muttered.

The owner of the bike had gone into a burger place, probably to pick up an order. Nari had the crash helmet on and the bike started in a matter of seconds. She was at the end of the street in Amsterdam and he still hadn’t run out to see who’d taken his bike. After that she made good time without going crazy. She’d pushed the bike up to the top end of the speedo once, just to know what it felt like. Only the once though, the rest of the journey was at speeds unlikely to annoy the cops. She’d have been at the motel before Ruby, if she hadn’t decided to dump the bike a good two miles from the motel. The watcher hadn’t been there, lurking somewhere, since she’d left London. She was determined to keep it that way.

“It’s no good, I can’t set you alight.” She muttered.

It was a kind of agreed street wisdom, that if you borrowed a vehicle without asking, you torched it afterwards. Fire removed all evidence, though Nari did think the logic was a bit flawed. For one thing her DNA wasn’t human, or at least most of it wasn’t. Then there was the fact that being left out in the elements got rid of fingerprints and DNA evidence. On TV they might get prints off a car that had been dumped years ago, but only on TV. Nari couldn’t torch the guy’s bike. She actually locked it and caressed the petrol tanks.

“Thank you Mr Ducati, I hope it was good for you too.” She muttered.

The keys and the crash helmet went into a dumpster about halfway to the motel in Landen. The cops might search that far for a homicide, but not for a plain taking without consent. She walked across the motel car park, just as Ruby and Anna walked in from the main road. They were carrying several carrier bags of what looked to be takeaway food.

“Nari.....You’re just in time.” Said Anna. “We just bought enough Thai food to feed an army.”

“Did you have a decent journey ?” Asked Ruby.

“Yeah.... You know how it goes, all pretty boring.”

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Ruby wanted to look the compound over that night, after everyone had been fed huge amounts of Thai food. No one was in the mood to go out again, but Ruby always liked to prepare well for a raid. Plus, as she told them as her friends put their outdoor clothing on again;

“If Lily is being held in that compound, we have no idea what might have been done to her. We need to do all this very quickly. A look over the place tonight, then I’ll decide on the next step.”

She always said they weren’t a democracy, that the final decision was always hers. None of them needed to be there though. Ruby would make sure no one was out of pocket by the time they returned home. One or two would get a payment of some kind, but most of them were there simply because she’d asked them.

“One SUV, we’ll be a bit cramped.” She said. “If there’s somewhere unobtrusive to park, I may enter the compound tonight.”

“Tonight !” Said Delmar. “We’re not prepared.”

“Not physically enter, I have a way of becoming what Spider calls a ghost. I can enter the compound without being seen. No touching anything or being able to bring Lily out. We will at least know if she’s really in there.”

“And if she isn’t ?” Asked Nari.

“I’ll ask Villand’s people to keep looking, while we begin the search for Kallina.”

Ruby chose Anna to remain in the motel, someone had to remain and look after their things. Both Nari and Sophie had mentioned a feeling of being watched, so she was taking no chances. It was still a bit cramped in the SUV. One parked SUV near the compound was nothing, two looked like a team

reconnoitring the place. Spider drove and found a good spot outside a convenience store, with a good view of the compound.

"It looks sinister, I can see why the local street kids avoid it." Said Charlotte.

"The street lighting is good and I can see at least four cameras covering the gate." Said Spider.

Walled compounds aren't that rare in any city, people just get used to seeing a wall. Ruby knew of two near her in Hackney and they were just part of the landscape. Sometimes residential, or something to do with local government. Rarely anything sinister, but Ruby was picking up a bad vibe from the building inside the compound.

"It feels like a bad place." Said Nari.

"I'm going in there." Said Ruby. "Just a quick look in every room. There is a chance that despite the usual accuracy of Villand's people.....Lily might not be in there."

"My contact said she was definitely in Landen." Said Spider.

"Landen is a bit city." Said Ruby. "There must be a lot of walled compounds. The kids might be right, this one might be something to with the local cops."

"Can I come with you?" Asked Sarah. "It is sort of my turn."

They were all looking at her, all keen. Everyone wanted to experience being just a shadow, of course they did. No time to teach someone the basics though, there really was only one sensible choice.

"I'll take Sophie, we've done this sort of thing before. Sophie can do the outside of the building; we need to know about the compound. The number of cameras, where they are....Stop giving me that look Sophie, I do know this isn't your first rodeo. I'll look around the inside of the building."

"I could go as well." Said Sarah.

"No, just myself and Sophie....This time."

How did the change look to the others? There were a few gasps as she turned herself and Sophie into what looked like clouds of dust. The clouds merged and Ruby pictured them both standing in front of the front gate to the compound. A brief touch of fingers and Sophie was off, walking around the outer wall.

"Here I go." Ruby muttered.

The gates looked serious; wood reinforced with a lot of steel banding. Ruby walked straight through them and was inside the compound. The building inside the compound was small, but complicated. Old, it looked to have been added to over the years. Lots of weird little rooms and strange extensions to make it hard to search. There were two identically black BMWs inside the compound, which did look the kind of thing officialdom used.

"I hope all this isn't just to give the local drug squad the once over." She muttered.

The compound was Sophie's to look over, Ruby knew she'd do a good job of it. There would probably be sketches by morning and a detailed plan of the cameras and alarms. Ruby walked through the main door of the building. It was light inside, lots of fluorescent light. Again, it all looked very like some kind of police department. As did the man in the room to her left. He was dressed in polyester trousers and a long-sleeved white shirt. A gun on his hip, though a lot of people who weren't cops, carried guns. He was asleep, leaning back in a leather office chair. The bank of screens in front of him showed the outside street. There was one camera showing a room with a woman asleep on a bed, though her face was hidden by a blanket.

'Containment One.'

According to the text on the screen. Helpful, if she'd had any idea where containment one was likely to be. No wrecking her plan though, she was determined to look in every room on each floor, working clockwise. The next room down the corridor was just a plain vanilla office. There was even a

calendar on the wall, with picture of birds on it. Ruby looked in every room on the ground floor, before boredom and frustration kicked in.

“Fuck it.....Containment must be in the basement.” She muttered.

As far as she knew no one could hear her mutters apart from her. She’d had a long conversation with Sophie while in shadow mode and no one had heard them. On the basis that dungeons were always in basements, Ruby looked for stairs leading down. A guard turned a corner and walked through her, which felt really weird. Another guy in polyester trousers and a cheap shirt. He too had a gun in a holster on his hip.

“If this place is Belgian immigration services....I won’t be impressed with Villand.”

The guard, if that’s what he was, had a key card in his hand. Of course, his thumb was over his name and most of the company name, though it started with GA. She followed him all the way to an elevator and didn’t see the name until he leant forward to use the card.

“Gallaan Industries.....That makes sense.” She muttered.

Ruby left the guard to use the elevator, she hadn’t mastered lift shafts yet. There was so much about the forces she used that she didn’t understand and those who could tell her, were probably long dead. She knew how to crush something she wanted crushed. She knew how to incinerate something she wanted burned. How it all worked though, was a mystery. Sometimes Ruby felt like a child still learning how to walk. She carried on down the corridor, still looking for stairs.

Max had mentioned Gallaan Industries to her, a corporate conglomerate registered in Delaware.

While dozens of relief flights brought food into the Yemen. Their helicopters kept taking weapons to both sides in the conflict. In her own work too, the name of Gallaan kept coming up. It was often there, hidden in the minds of financiers, like a guilty secret. Any company at the bleeding edge of defence research that was going through a cash crisis. Gallaan were there to help, for a hefty chunk of equity of course. They seemed to have very deep pockets. Why they’d grab Lily was a mystery, but from the information she’d picked up, it fitted their MO, their modus operandi. She found the stairs and walked down a floor. The stairs ended, it seemed there was only basement floor.

‘Authorised Personnel Only

Level 5 clearance and above.’

Said the notice on the very solid looking doors. Basically, it was telling the sleepy plebs in cheap shirts to stay upstairs, where they belonged. Ruby wondered why Mara had said the guards were tough. She found one of the tough ones on the other side of the doors. Dressed in a Led Zep T shirt and jeans, there was an AR15 on the chair next to him. He was looking at a repeater set of screens to the ones upstairs. He was alert, focused and he looked very fit.

“Looks like I found the A team.” She mumbled.

Just past him was a door on the left marked as ‘Containment Two,’ while on her right was ‘Containment One.’ Ruby was determined to look in containment two before leaving, but her main goal was to find Lily. Lily Marigold Faria to be precise, who had to be about twenty-three or four by now. Ex civil servant in a branch of British intelligence that few knew existed. She’d also provided energy weapons for Max to use, which might well have caused Gallaan to take an interest in her. Why the middle name Marigold ? Her mother’s favourite aunt had been called Marigold.

Ruby walked straight through the doors to Containment One. Another tough guard was sat behind a desk, with another AR15 to keep him company. The thick steel bars grabbed Ruby’s attention and the girl behind them. The guard was yelling down his phone at someone.

“.....No Dimitri, I’m not going on another blind date arranged by your wife.....No.....”

The bars cut the room in half and beyond them was what amounted to a small flat. A one-bedroom flat with a shower and toilet, and a tiny lounge area. Even a small kitchen with the smallest fridge Ruby had ever seen. It looked alright; she'd once lived in worse student digs. There were no partitions though, no screens or curtains. From showering to having a pee, the girl in the bed had no privacy from the guard, or the cameras dotted around the room.

".....Your wife thinks I need a good woman Dimitri.....I'm looking for a little fun...."

Through the bars and Ruby was certain she'd found Lily. She'd had a thing about tattoos of fantasy characters, dragons and demons mostly. Ruby remembered Lily having a tattoo of a wyvern near her left shoulder. The blanket covered all of her, but her left leg was stuck out. On the girl's left calf, was the tattoo of a baby dragon. Not definite proof, so Ruby knelt next to the bed and peered under the blanket. There, fast asleep, was the face of Lily Faria. Ruby so wanted to hug her, to let her know rescue was close.

"One more day Lily." She muttered. "Tomorrow night you'll be free."

There was no way of becoming solid for a few seconds, to offer Lily support, perhaps a hug. The gift didn't work like that and anyway, there were all the cameras. Ruby left the cell with a heavy heart and the determination to come back the next night, with a few friends. She went through the door to containment two and found another tough looking guard and yet another set of bars. A man asleep in a bed this time, he looked to be about the same age as Lily. Ruby had a good memory for faces, but she didn't know the young man.

"Whoever you are, I'll get you out of here too."

No time to dawdle, Sophie would be wondering where she'd got to. So would the others and she didn't want them staging a badly organised rescue mission. She had to look at the rest of the basement, there were only another three rooms. Containments three and four were mercifully empty and dark. The final room at the end of the corridor had a bad feeling about it. Her gift often gave her strong, but unexplained feeling about certain places. She still wasn't sure if it was a gift, or a curse. Her hand was trembling as she instinctively tried to open the door.

"Idiot." She muttered.

Her hand went through the door handle, a really silly thing that made her angry with herself. Through the door and there was a furnace. Not the heating type of furnace, it was the kind usually used in a crematorium. It was obviously the final destination for those no longer worth holding in the cells.

"When we have Lily and the young man, this place is going up in flames. All of it, everything."

Sophie had been up most of the night drawing her plans of the outside areas of the compound. She had it all, every alarm, every camera. It was a messy area; parts of the building touched the outside wall. Part of the outside wall also merged with a row of houses at the back of the compound. It had all looked so simple when they been sat in the SUV, looking at the front gates. Plus, it had to be admitted, Ruby hadn't been that thorough. She hadn't even looked at the upper floor of the building, anything might be up there. The best guess was storage and some kind of barracks for the guards. Their first look at the compound had been fast and a bit sloppy. The problem was that Ruby wanted to attack the compound that night.

"I agree with Spider." Said Roger. "Ruby has the ability to look around the building unseen. The sensible thing would be to carry on with the reconnaissance for the next two or three nights. That way we'd go in there knowing where everything is and every guard is located."

"That does make sense Ruby." Added Nari.



“You wouldn’t say that if you’d seen the furnace.” Said Ruby. “What if they decide Lily is of no further value ? That might happen tomorrow.”

“If it was a military target in the middle of nowhere, I’d say let’s go right now.” Said Charlotte. “It’s a respectable looking compound in Landen though, in Belgium. The police are likely to arrive within a few minutes of someone hearing gunfire. I hate to agree with slow and cautious, but it does make sense.”

“Yeah, we don’t want a fight with the local cops.” Said Anna. “We are all here on our own passports after all. But.....If you give the we’re not a democracy speech, I’ll go with you if you want to attack the building tonight.”

“Oh yes, me too.” Said Sophie.

There was a lot of laughter, with a break for coffee. Anna had found a patisserie with fresh blueberry muffins, so of course everyone had to have one of those. Sophie noticed that without Ruby having to actually give her not a democracy speech, she had everyone on her side.

“Alright, does anyone know what police response times are like in Landen ?” Asked Ruby.

“That came up in a talk with Mara.” Said Charlotte. “They’re busy with low level crime and have too few officers. By the time someone calls in gunfire and the police actually arrive, could be anywhere from twenty minutes to half an hour.”

“Good, we’ll work on having fifteen minutes.” Said Ruby. “No hurting the Landen cops of course, that goes without saying. If they arrive early, we grab Lily and go into stealth mode.”

“Do we know anything about the other prisoner you saw ?” Asked Sarah.

“No, I didn’t recognise him and there isn’t time to ask the UK security services about him. Lily comes first of course, but I want to get him out of there too. We’ll worry about who the hell he is later.”

Sophie had noticed that there comes a point during planning an attack, where everyone is in, they’re all a hundred percent committed. The moment arrived when Spider asked the question a few of them must have been wanting to ask.

“How about the compound’s guards. Are they all valid targets ?” He asked.

“They might run away Spider; thought I doubt it.” Said Ruby. “If they offer resistance, they can go up in flames with everything else.”

“Do we have anything planned for everything going up in flames ?” Asked Anna.

“That would be me.” Said Charlotte.

“Alright.....This what we’re going to do tonight.” Said Ruby.

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Nari had a bit of a walk to get in position, so Spider had used one of the SUVs to drop her off nice and early. Everyone else would arrive near the compound a bit later. It wasn’t just a long way around the block to avoid the compound, she needed time to find the best placed roof in the terrace, with the best view of the compound.

“Do a good job with a sniper rifle once.” She muttered. “And you get the job forever.”

The sniper rifle was in a cricket bag. For some reason a cricket bag was Spider’s usual method of packing a few essentials. It obviously had sentimental value to him. He’s only agreed to loan it to her, after she’d promised to return it. Nari had tried to dress a little more hippy than usual and so far at least, no one had looked at her for longer than it took to check her out.

“Hey, you going to Suffi’s party ?” One guy called out.

“Maybe, later.”

She’d no idea who Suffi was, or anything about the party. She was just trying to blend in with the surroundings. The row of terraced houses behind the compound, offered the only high place with a

view of most of the compound. Clambering up to the roof was easy, not being seen doing it was the hard part.

“At least it’s a warm dry night.” She muttered.

The sniper rifle had been among the weapons provided by Malou. Quite old, it was a copy made in Brazil, of a weapon the French military had used in the nineteen sixties. A good weapon, despite its age and rather unorthodox pedigree. She’d stripped it down earlier in the day and pronounced it to be fit for purpose. A clip that only held five round, though she had some spare rounds in the pocket of her jacket. There was that saying of course, about sniper rifles. Spider had told it to her and it made good sense. If you needed more than five rounds, you should have got much closer and brought an Uzi. Another young guy checked out her backside in a very obvious way.

“Pretty lady.....Do you want to go out tonight ?”

“No, I’m going to Suffi’s party.”

“Me too..... See you there. Gotta Name ?”

“No.”

Three of the houses were in the right spot, though she liked the look of the one in the centre. It was slightly higher than the others and Sophie remembered it having a section of flat roof. Sophie was like that; she always remembered the details. There was a narrow alleyway next to the building, just about wide enough for a few rubbish bins and piles of assorted junk. Good news, there was a drain pipe that went all the way up. Extra good news, there were no windows facing into the alley.

“Rusty and dangerous, my favourite.” She muttered, while prodding the pipe.

The fall would leave her with a few bruises, but she was pretty tough, it wouldn’t kill her. Speed was the thing, getting up onto the roof before anyone saw her. The cricket bag went on her back and she was up and climbing as fast as she could. The pipe complained and she put a few extra dents in the guttering, as she clambered over it. But she was on the flat roof, with a fair degree of certainty that no one had seen her get there. A small outhouse type structure on the roof, with a door that had to give the residents access to the roof. Judging by the fact that it refused to open, it was probably chained up on the other side.

“Perfect.” She mumbled.

Her favourite rooftop furniture to use as cover were aircon units, but there were none of those. The wall between that roof and the one next door was low, probably just over three feet. It would do though, once she was lying on the ground. The angle was just about as good as it could be, about ninety percent of the compound was a clear field of fire. She could link minds with Ruby, but she wasn’t as good at it as the others. It always left her with a killer headache for days. Nari used a burner phone to send a text to Ruby.

‘Ready for the pizza to arrive.’

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