

Ruby 3

Chapter 14 - Milan

“Charlotte knew Italy well, though mainly the tourist’s Italy. The Amalfi coast, Rome, Florence, all the usual places people went to have a fun vacation. To her Milan had just been a few mental notes given to her as part of her education, added to by comments from those who’d been there.”

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~ Then ~

~ Varna, Bulgaria, in simpler times ~

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.

“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."

~ ~

~ Now ~

"You're definitely sure you'll be alright without them there ?" Asked Foxy.

Sir Edwin Fox was a little worried that Lily might think it was all her doing. A personal assistant who thought they had the boss twisted round their little finger was a nightmare. There had been a lady called Wendy, when he'd been working his way up the greasy pole at the MOD. Wendy had told everyone she was the real brains of his department, the one pulling the strings. Foxy was sure her talk had cost him a promotion. Lily did have a point though, it was time for Ruby to be offered more support than a few intelligence reports.

"Yes, we're fine." Said George. "Trudy is always around and Kallina appears at least twice a day. Quite alarming sometimes, having her pop up, as if by magic. We're well looked after and with this truce that seems to be holding..... For now at least, we can survive without Rory and his men."

"Rory will be reassigned, but if you feel the need, there are other people I can send."

"Trust me Foxy.....If anything weird happens here, you'll be the first to know."

After the phone call ended, Foxy looked at the framed photograph on his wall for a minute or so. He'd taken a picture of the Ragnarök message, one of the rogues Das Geheimnis had painted on his wall. He might have lost the battle about his office being redecorated, but the framed picture to the right of his desk was a minor victory. His job was often like that.

"Savour the minor victories." He muttered.

The Ragnarök message had been a declaration of war. A declaration Foxy was about do something about, something concrete, something Lily would definitely approve of. He pressed the intercom on his desk.

"Is he here yet ?"

"Arrived ten minutes ago." Said Lily. "I've given him coffee and biscuits."

"Send him in please."

Rory knew the way the ministry worked. He might have been summoned by the boss, but he walked in carrying his coffee mug and a plate of digestive biscuits. As if to reassert the correct pecking order, Lily came in with coffee for Foxy. His was in an expensive porcelain cup.

"Thank you for coming in Rory." Said Foxy. "I heard things are quiet at the Polandrous Foundation."

"We've investigated all we can and to be honest..... Trudy and the others can probably protect the building better than my people."

Lily smiled as she left his office, she knew where he was about to send Rory and two of his men.

"Good, just as I suspected." Said Foxy. "I'd like you to get kitted up for warmer weather. You can take Graham with you and one other, a weapons specialist. Preferably someone who's been through the tough guy courses that six run. Your choice though."

"He's a bit of an odd choice, but given his history, I'd like to take Todd." Said Rory. "I'm assuming you are sending us to Kenya to help Ruby Mason and her friends?"

"Todd..... You're right, he is an odd choice. You know him better than I do though, and yes, you will be going to Kenya."

"Will the Kenyan government be informed?" Asked Rory. "They can get a bit.....Let's just say they'll see it in a very bad light if we don't tell them and they find out."

"I know, I can see the headlines now.....Britain acting as though the African colonies were still theirs....etc. This will be an official trip and we will inform the Kenyan Government. You'll be there training police recruits, just training and consultancy. It'll just take you a few weeks to begin the training sessions."

"I see..... All done by smoke and mirrors." Said Rory.

"Exactly.....Your real mission will be to protect Ruby and her wunderkinds. No matter what may happen out there, no matter who might be attacking her. Your job is to keep her alive."

"Even if she's fighting the Kenyan police? You really want me to kill anyone attacking her?"

Foxy knew that Rory knew the answer already and none of their conversation would go into a file, not one word if it. Rory just wanted the mission parameters to be clear and meticulously defined.

"The Americans have such grand sounding words Rory, like neutralising enemy forces and collateral damage. We use simpler, more honest words. Yes, if the Kenyan police are trying to kill Ruby and her friends, you will kill them."

"When do we leave?"

"As soon as you're kitted up and ready to go. Can you be ready in twenty four hours?"

"No problem."

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Charlotte's life had been unusual, she never argued with anyone about that. Lots of trips abroad, but mainly to tourist destinations, or dangerous places few others had ever visited. Her life was a weird mixture of the boring, the exciting and the downright terrifying. A conflict of ideas and emotions that left her feeling stressed some days and bored beyond words the next.

"I'm sure I'll have ulcers by the time I'm thirty." She said.

Jai was looking at her, the same look she normally reserved for Kallina, after she'd arrived somewhere with Constanze in her arms.

"Sorry, was that a bit too random?" She asked.

Just Jai and Christophe on the plane with her, bringing Pablo would have added complications.

Distractions too and as it was her first meeting with anyone like the cartel, she didn't need distractions.

"I don't think ulcers are caused by stress." Said Christophe. "I'm sure I read they're caused by bacteria in the gut."

"Beta blockers, my doc put me on beta blockers once." Said Jai.

"I've heard of those, do they work?" She asked.

"No fear, no pain lady.....Wow.... I went through this guy's house in Bogota. Six dead, I never got so much as a scratch. It was only the erection problems that made me stop using them."

"Yeah..... I tried them once." Said Christophe. "Couldn't get a decent hard on for weeks."

Charlotte enjoyed the company of men, she wasn't really a girly type of girl. Shopping expeditions could be fun, but no listening to other girl's problems over a tub of rocky road. At that moment though, she realised the error of not bringing another woman on the trip.

"The truth is, you're too young to start fucking with your brain chemistry." Said Jai.

"I do get stressed sometimes." She said. "Now I'm fine, but as we were getting on the plane.....I was trembling all over."

"I bet this is your first meeting like this." Said Christophe. "Just learn to cope without popping pills or drinking too much. Go in there to see Gregor as though you own the place."

"Yeah.... Gregor is a pussy." Added Jai.

"Thanks, that helps." She said.

Had it helped, really helped? Charlotte hadn't intended to take beta blockers, but knowing they'd used them had made her feel better. They were experienced cartel men, top of the range sicarios. If they had to work at relieving stress, she was doing alright.

"Do you want to know my tip?" Asked Jai.

"Yes, I would..... This has all made me feel better."

"Toughen up Charlotte and if anyone looks like they're going to fuck with you..... You fuck with them first."

"A good one to remember." Said Christophe.

"Oh I will..... If anyone looks like fucking with me.... They'll be in trouble."

Both of the men came over and bumped knuckles with her and Charlie felt prouder than when Kallina had praised her spoken Hungarian.

One of the advantages of a private plane was having no constant stream of messages over the internal speakers. A good looking man in a perfectly ironed white shirt had appeared out of the cockpit at regular intervals, usually to inform them of their progress across Europe. He appeared once again.

"We'll be landing in Milan in about twenty minutes." He said. "The weather is dry with a temperature of twenty nine degrees and low humidity."

"Perfect." Said Christophe.

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Arbiter Nazili Anso was the first to notice the glimmer among the trees to the north. It wasn't his duty to look for such things; he just noticed sights and sounds the others missed. By the time he'd walked down the thousand and sixty eight steps from the top of the sacred tower, Arbiter Heranza Methun was waiting for him.

"It'll be her again Nazili." She said. "The abomination who found a way to pierce the shroud."

"Not pierce; she can only catch a few glimpses of our world."

"She upsets the people, getting them agitated." Said Heranza. "A few actually waved their hands at her, like excited children. Waving to that.....Thing."

Heranza was actually younger than him; she just hadn't handled their advanced age as well as him. Few had, all the people of the true faith were suffering from the ravages of time. Nazili pulled his robes tighter, more to ward off anxiety than the cool morning breeze.

"She's not a thing, or an abomination." He said. "Like you, I wish she'd go away, though I don't think she will. Her and those who come with her are like us..... Almost our children."

"Children..... Children." Barked Heranza. "They may look like us, I'll give you that. There's human in there too, quite a lot of human. They've been breeding with.....Those creatures. It's like breeding with the wild animals of the forest."

Anger, so much anger and not only from Heranza. Sometimes the anger was a harbinger of mental confusion and eventual death. Out of the thousands who'd decided to be hidden behind the shroud forever, only slightly more than fifty still lived. Repairing their bodies forever was fairly easy. It was their minds; they'd underestimated the effect of such long lives on their minds. Far too often, Nazili's role seemed to be calming down angry followers of the true faith.

"It may not have been their choice." He said. "We can create hybrids, so we must assume the humans have developed the same capability. There is very little chance of them breaking through into our world, so we should go and look at them again. Just us, we must keep the people away from the Valley of the Stone."

"The Valley of the Sacred Stone." She said, correcting him.

"Everywhere is sacred Heranza, even some of the oldest trees. We've made so much of our world holy, that using the word sacred is redundant."

Oh, that look again. They were the last two surviving Arbiters, or he was sure she'd have reported him for heresy. Nazili wasn't sure if he even believed in their Gods anymore. There had been something in the great temple when he'd been a child, though it might have been an hallucination. Countless millennia had gone by too, until he wasn't sure if what he remembered, was what he'd actually seen as a very young child.

"You're sure they can't penetrate the shroud?" Asked Heranza.

"No, there have been a lot of changes to the world we live on. Continents have moved, the magnetic poles have swapped, several times. We've not been immune to the effects, our climate is no longer as cool and fresh as it once was. The stone in their world has been buried deep by the movement of the planet's crust. It's been thrust so far down, that I can no longer feel it."

"Perhaps it's been destroyed." She said.

"I hope so, then we'd be able to ignore the female who won't leave us alone."

"If any of them did manage to break the seal.....What would you do?" She asked.

"Kill them of course, every single one of them."

"You would?.....You seemed to be defending them."

"They are our descendants, a future for us, even if it's only by proxy. That I can sympathise with Heranza. But thousands of our people gave their lives to create the shroud that hides us, some gave their souls too. Breaking through.....It has to be punished by death."

"I'm glad you feel that way.....Do you think they know, these children waiting outside the shroud. Do you think they know why we locked ourselves in this prison?"

"I very much doubt it. Come on Heranza, we must get to the stone before any of our people arrive. They mustn't be allowed to be agitated again."

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Max Krause hadn't known what to expect. There was a new portaloo in the lowest level of the basement, though the lowest level looked like subsidence after an earthquake, rather than part of

the original building. The Ostbys had left him to it, as he'd explored what had been his prison for several years. No hierarchy had been put in place, Kallina had said very little.

"This is Max; he lived here for some time. He's good at getting rid of the snakes."

That had been it, the total extent of her introduction of him to them, and them to him. A second bed had been placed in a corner of the storeroom. Brand new with new bedding, it wasn't surprising that Lionel and Monique had claimed it as theirs. Max returned to where the Ostbys had been sat when he'd arrived, at the table in what he'd always thought of as the lounge. It was where he'd listened to his radio, on the days when it would actually pick anything up. It was time to test how tough they were, how much they might resist a takeover.

"I'll be using the bed in the storeroom; you two can go back to sleeping in my old bed."

No response at all from Lionel, she was the one he'd have to watch. Monique had a look in her eyes, a look that might well be saying 'there are two of us and you'll need to sleep occasionally.' Perhaps he was overreacting, being in solitary for so long had probably dented to ability to read people.

"Fine, it was probably meant for you anyway." Said Monique.

"How long did you live here?" Asked Lionel.

"Years, it felt like an eternity and I didn't live here. This was my prison. In the end I escaped, though thinking about it, it might have been the food that drove me to escape."

"We looked around, the walls look impregnable." Said Lionel.

"You escaped? How did you escape?" Asked Monique.

His people skills had never been that good and he definitely didn't know how to read Mrs Ostby. From hostility in her eyes to some sort of hero worship, in just a few minutes. Not that he wanted to make a takeover bid in that particular direction. He did have to sleep and Lionel might be the jealous type, the quiet ones usually were.

"Yes, I escaped. I jumped down the hole in the floor." He said.

"The latrine hole?" Asked Lionel.

"I think it was just a hole, before people started crapping down it. I lost weight, greased myself with butter and went for it. I'm still sure it was all the beans..... Kallina used to bring me beans and burgers, beans and sausages. Sometimes just tins with nothing in except beans. In the end I was so fucking fed up with beans....."

"Where does the hole lead to?" Asked Monique.

"A cave system, but it's a long way to drop. The caves will lead you out, but then your problems really begin. Outside of our cosy little den is some of the most hostile terrain on the planet. If the heat, bugs and snakes don't kill you, the local tribesmen probably will."

"But you obviously survived."

"Yes I did Monique, I got lucky. I've no intention of trying to escape that way again. Don't let me stop you from trying though, if you fancy your chances."

"So we just eat our beans and wait patiently?" She asked.

"I intend to..... Though as I said. If you fancy trying to escape.... Go for it. Now, I fancy a shower, if Lionel would be good enough to pour water over me. I will return the favour of course."

"Is there a shower? We didn't see one." Said Lionel.

"No, you just soap up and stand over the hole and use bottled water to rinse off. Kallina always brings tons of water, most of it in large bottles. You'll need to shower at least twice a week, our prison is a hot and sticky place. Between showering you should use hand sanitiser on the bits that tend to get itchy. I used to rinse myself, but I'm not as bendy as I once was. And it's been a while since I had a really good wash. So Lionel.....Are you up for it?"

"I would, but Charlotte broke my hand."

Lionel was holding up a hand that didn't look too bad, but his fingers were tightly bandaged.

"I'll do it." Said Monique. "Call it self-interest, I can tell that you haven't had a decent wash in quite some time."

"You don't mind?" He asked.

"I'm sure you've got nothing I haven't seen before Max. Unless you're the shy type?"

"No, just give me a few seconds to find the box of shower gel I like."

It felt odd, standing over the hole while Monique watched him soap up. There was a look on her face. A look that if he'd met her in a bar somewhere, would have had him cancelling anything else he had planned for that night, maybe even the next day.

"I love this shower gel, it smells of almonds." He said.

"Say when and I'll pour."

"Now will do..... Slowly though."

Max Krause hadn't known what to expect. He certainly hadn't expected Monique to gently bite the wet skin of his upper arm.

"I quite like muscles Max."

She put her mouth over his biceps and bit him, quite gently at first. No tooth marks, but she'd ended up biting quite hard... Hard enough to leave a mark. He tried to grab her, but his arms were still a bit soapy.

"Keep still so I can finish pouring water over you." She said.

Monique helped him dry his back, commenting on how much better he smelled. Max didn't really know what to make of it all, but he was certain of one thing. Life in the basement was going to be interesting.

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Charlotte knew Italy well, though mainly the tourist's Italy. The Amalfi coast, Rome, Florence, all the usual places people went to have a fun vacation. To her Milan had just been a few mental notes given to her as part of her education, added to by comments from those who'd been there. She desperately wanted to know more, to fill in the gaps in her knowledge of the city. As the limousine Gregor had sent for her drove through the busy streets, she realised her local knowledge was good enough. The cartel had asked to see her, they needed something from her.

"There, that's their building." Said Jai.

Tinted limo windows to give privacy, the glass gave the building a strange halo, as though pointing a finger at where she was going.

"Do they have the whole building?" She asked.

"No, just the top two or three floors." Said Christophe. "Gregor Ross has an office and an apartment on the top floor."

"He's even got a rooftop pool up there." Added Jai.

The driver opened the door, even smiling at her as she stepped out of the limousine. The handover was smooth and looked well-practised. A young woman in a smart business suit took them from the limousine, past the reception area and into an elevator. None of the usual signing in and badge nonsense for them it seemed.

"Gregor is so pleased you could come." Said the woman.

"I'm glad to be here." Said Charlie.

The separation from her companions was smooth too, there were even drinks and nibbles waiting for them. Down a short corridor with a great view of Gregor's rooftop pool and she was being shown

into his office. Gregor was tall, and a little plump. He had what Serge used to describe as a florid complexion, which usually meant someone was a little too fond of a drink.

"Come in.....I've had some refreshments put on the coffee table."

"Thank you."

Olga had already told her about his office being Feng shui'ed, or whatever the correct term was. A fancy term for hiring an interior designer with a little taste. Olga was right though, Gregor's office wouldn't have looked out of place in a lifestyle magazine.

"Hmmm I rarely eat on planes, even private ones." She said. "Is it rude if I start on the nibbles?"

"No, you nibble away."

A bit of a ruse, though she was feeling hungry. Gregor was a bit of a narcissist according to Olga, a man who liked to hear the sound of his own voice. He talked while she ate, giving her a chance to gently probe his thoughts and run her mental probes over his office. She'd already noted the three armed men hiding just out of sight. They were there in case she failed the test.

".....Family is important Charlotte. Do you have a family?"

"Yes I do, quite a large family, there are thirteen of us. Actually fourteen....Or there will be once the baby grows up."

A lot more small talk, all of it being looked at by two of his most trusted men, the cartel equivalent of generals. Three cameras in the room, all well-hidden. Gregor knew where they were though, so she knew. His mind was so easy to read, he might as well have written his thoughts on a white board.

"I have to say, you're not what I expected." He said.

"Should I have arrived covered in tattoos and spat on your rug? I've been trained by the best and do you know what the best weapon is?" She asked.

He was beginning to look nervous, his complexion turning even more florid.

"No." He said.

"Being underestimated."

It was really going to happen, she knew it when his phone rang. Not the phone on his desk, the cellphone on the coffee table started to play something classical.

"Sorry..... It must be important."

No offering to leave the room, Charlotte carried on nibbling at some really nice samosas. Gregor was beginning to sweat a little as he listened to what was being said to him. Charlotte didn't know the exact words, looking into minds rarely worked that way. Moods though and intent, those were the key to it all. She knew she'd failed the test.

"You're sure?.....You all agree?" Asked Gregor.

Gregor snapped his fingers and the three armed men walked into the room, spreading themselves out. Poor Gregor, he wasn't used to violent scenes being played out on the premises, in his own office.

"I'm sorry Charlotte." He said. "You've obviously fooled a few people, even Pablo it seems, but my people know you're not what you claim to be."

She'd failed the test, which seemed to purely involve being watched to see if she looked and sounded tough enough to his two generals. Her laid back body language had obviously failed to impress. They intended to take her away and kill her. A symbolic black eye for Olga and a warning to others who thought about wasting the cartel's time.

"So.... What happens now?" She asked.

"You shouldn't have lied to us Charlotte."

She could have used her speed and strength, they'd have been easier to explain afterwards. Charlie was angry though and anger always clouded her judgement. It was important to her that Gregor understood, it was all his fault.

"You've made me very angry." She told him.

The three men laughing made her even more angry. Gregor she merely pointed at, before using her gifts to paralyse him. His men though, they needed to suffer. One was reaching under his jacket for a gun.

"Really..... You're that stupid?" She snapped.

All three of them at once, paralysed and allowed to fall to the floor. That would probably have been enough to convince Gregor that he'd underestimated her, but her anger was growing. It was really easy to asphyxiate the strongest of men, just a little pressure against the throat and the top of their chest. Kallina had taught her the basics, with Ruby training her to use her skills with precision.

"Used properly you can incapacitate anyone without killing them." Ruby had told her.

They needed a lesson, a lesson not soon forgotten. His generals too, they were watching it all. Nothing too drastic for them, just unconsciousness that would take several hours to wear off.

"I think you've now learned not to upset me." She said.

The three men were close to death before she let them breathe again. Like fish on dry land, they flapped about on the floor, pulling air into their lungs. None of them tried to reach for a gun, they'd learned that one. Ruby wouldn't have approved of course, but Charlotte remembered what Jai had told her.

"You tried to fuck with me; so I fucked with you." She said.

Gregor recovered quickly, he hadn't been nearly strangled. There was fear in his mind, lots of fear, mixed with curiosity.

"How did you do that?" He asked.

"A little something my mothers taught me. So..... Am I hired, or do you need a little more convincing."

"The job is yours Charlotte, I almost feel sorry for Arturo."

Style and bravado seemed to be everything in the cartel and Charlie was a quick learner. She poured herself a glass of wine and picked at the nibbles, as Gregor's men recovered and left the room. She picked up hatred from their minds, but the main emotion was fear.

"It needs to be done quickly, there is a time issue." Said Gregor. "We've already lost far too many people in this war."

"Quick is likely to mean some of Arturo's people dying too." She said. "Will that be a problem for the cartel?"

"No, kill them all if you like."

"Most important question, I don't come cheap. How much are you prepared to pay to be rid of the Arturo problem?"

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Once their word had been instant law, immediately obeyed without question. There had been a full seven Arbiters then though and every important decision was debated. Now it was just her and Arbiter Nazili Anso, deciding what was best for the surviving people of the one true faith. Arbiter Heranza Methun understood why their commands were sometimes questioned, though she had to remain strong and resolute.

"You will obey." She shouted. "The sacred stone is closed today; no one is allowed to congregate."

"We've seen the signs." Someone shouted. "They're watching us again, the outsiders."

“We have a right to see them.” From another voice.

“What are you trying to hide from us ?”

Agitation, the people were becoming agitated and that couldn't be allowed to happen. With just two Arbiters left, any serious dissent could lead to anarchy. Nazili did it first and she did the same. A flame in the palm of their right hands, the sacred flame. A badge of office more than a threat, but it could be used to persuade and punish.

“The Arbiters are the hands of the Gods.” Said Nazili.

“Our actions are directed by the Gods, we are the instruments of their will.” Said Heranza.

A rarely used litany, though both she and Nazili knew it by heart. Their early training had included learning over a thousand such litanies and two thousand standard evocations. She watched as Nazili increased the size of the flame resting in his palm.

“Who here dares to disobey the word of the Gods ?” Nazili shouted.

The people weren't particularly brave or rebellious, just easily agitated at times. There was a lot of muttering and angry looks, but the crowd broke up and moved towards their dwellings.

“There are so few of us already.....I'd hate to have to use the flame on anyone.” Said Nazili.

“I agree..... Though if it comes to that. Can I suggest sacrificing Gratentia to the flames ? She seems to be the ringleader lately.”

“Duly noted Heranza, duly noted. Let's hope the outsider gives up on finding a way in, though I suspect she won't.”

Just past the sacred stone, a window had opened up among the trees. Huge, it reached as far to either side as a man could run in three or four minutes, and reached high up into the sky. Not a clear window, it was like looking through a rushing waterfall.

“There are more of them and there are children with them.” She said.

“Not children, different.....I sense it.” Said Nazili.

“Look, two of them have fire in their hands. They must have watched us.....If they can create the sacred flame Nazili.....”

“No, it's just a trick..... They're abominations.”

Even though she knew it was foolish, bordering on heresy, she created a small flame in her hand and waved it at the outsiders. The young ones looked like children to her and it had been so long since there had been children inside the shroud.

“Look..... Look.....They're so excited.” She said.

“Why would you do that ?” He asked.

“It's just that.....It's been so long.”

“I know and watching them doesn't help. We should ignore them and instruct the people to ignore them.”

They were turning to walk away, when Heranza felt something, a definite tickling in her mind. It was impossible, ludicrous, but the dark haired child had tried to communicate with her. She grabbed Nazili's arm.

“Wait, one of them tried to talk to me..... Her, the child with dark hair.”

“That's impossible.”

“I know, yet I can still feel her scratching at my mind.”

“They used one of our old artefacts to create the window, quite clever really. It's been set to contact home and created a window beyond their technology. For one of them to be able to push her thoughts through the shroud.... It's impossible.”

“Listen for her Nazili.....Calm your mind and listen.”

While he listened for a very quiet voice from an impossible place, she waved at the children waving at them. Not really children of course, though at her advanced age, everyone was a child.

"I hear her, I feel her, a name being repeated over and over again." He said.

"Ruby?"

"Yes."

"No abomination could push her mind through the shroud Nazili."

"I agree."

"Are we going to help her pierce the shroud?"

"Impossible." He said.

"Hearing her should be impossible."

"We could tell her where the sacred stone in their world is likely to be, and leave her fate in the hands of the Gods."

"Agreed." She said. "I'll tell her."

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