

## Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

### Chapter 11 – Family Problems

**“George Polandrous had noticed that air travel was wonderful, as long as you weren’t in a hurry. Getting from Paris to London, should have been easy, but there were delays, there always seemed to be delays.”**

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Whoever was attacking the compound, knew what they were doing. At around four in the morning the body reaches a low point. There were stories about more sick people dying at four am, than at any other time. As if their bodies had decided to give up the fight. Todd had learned in the military that it was a good time to bang on doors. Wake someone up around four and they’ll often tell you what you want to know, just to get rid of you. Of course, Todd wasn’t medically trained, some of it might have been urban myths, but there was definitely something about four am. He didn’t need to wake Ruby; she was already reaching for her clothes.

“That’s automatic fire, inside the compound.” He said. “I told Max he didn’t have enough people on the gates.”

The low light next to the bed, which was left on all night, went off. The attackers were really good, they’d managed to cut off the power within a few minutes of getting past the outer walls. Ruby hugged him in the dark, her mouth against his cheek.

“I have Charlie and Sophie in my head, asking if they can use their gifts to the full.” She said. “What do you think, can Max and his people deal with the attack?”

It was nice that she was using him as her military adviser, but they both knew there was only one answer.

“Tell them to use everything they’ve got.” He said.

Her face moved up and down against his, as Ruby nodded in the dark. Todd knew roughly where a hand gun was in a drawer. As he found it, he noticed there was a little light, Ruby’s hands were glowing. There was no warning, there never was. Ruby and the wunderkinds reacted faster than those totally human. It was as if every reaction in a life-threatening situation, was carried out by reflex actions. Her hands thrust in the direction of the window and the window wasn’t there anymore. Someone screamed, a serious scream that meant pain, a lot of pain.

“Crap !” He muttered.

The man outside the window holding an assault rifle, was on fire. A fire so hot and bright that it lit up their room. Todd felt no sympathy, the man had probably been about to shoot them both, asleep in their bed. Todd should have known where he’d left his own assault rifle, but he hadn’t. The compound had seemed so safe, as had that part of Somalia. He’d done the unforgiveable, he’d lost his focus for a while. The light now coming through what was left of the window, showed him his rifle, leaning against the side of the wardrobe.

“Charlie and Sophie will be fine.” Said Ruby. “It’s Max and his family I’m worried about, especially the two boys.”

“Yeah, families don’t belong in wars.”

Todd was first through the door to get outside and the number of fires was already making it easier to see. Max’s house still looked intact, but several other buildings were ablaze. Ruby had once told him about Jurgis and his insistence that all her gifts needed to be used, if those she cared about

were at risk. As they walked around the still burning remains of the man, he realised Jurgis had been right. Push Ruby and her wunderkinds hard enough and it would be like unleashing hell. There was a vehicle heading towards them that might have belonged to Max, or the attackers. It exploded in a ball of white-hot flames, before getting close to them.

“Sophie finally got to use her rocket launcher.” Said Ruby.

As they walked towards Max’s house there were a few bodies. No proper uniforms, the dead could have been friends or foes. Todd had run across the problem on special ops missions. Often both sides are the similar size and shape, all dressed in virtually identical dark clothing. In the heat of the moment, it was all too easy to mistake a civilian for the enemy, or even worse, shoot one of your own side. It happened, though no one liked to dwell on it. There was a huge explosion to the north, quite close to where the compound’s rear gate gave access to the farmlands. Todd looked at Ruby, expecting her to know what was going on. She merely shrugged at him.

“Charlie thinks Kallina is in action over there, but she’s not certain.” Said Ruby.

Kallina, he’d almost forgotten her. All that power and they still had doubts about whether she was recovered enough to use it effectively. Now they would find out, one way or the other. Two dark shapes appeared from somewhere and Todd had been close to shooting them. Both members of Max’s guards, Todd has recognised the two local men just in time. They looked scared, grateful to follow the orders of anyone who seemed to be in charge.

“Come with us, we’re going to protect Max and his family.” Said Ruby.

It was the usual chaos of war. Two people came out of Max’s house and fired at them. Todd fired back and hit one of them, though not seriously enough to stop them running away. They might have been the enemy, or two guards helping themselves to whatever they could steal in lieu of their final pay. It was going to be that sort of night, where it was best to assume no one was on your side unless you knew them well.

“The door’s open, not a good sign.” Said Ruby.

No sign of anything burning in the house, which was a good sign. There was the sound of someone moving about, maybe more than one person. Todd decided it was safer to announce their presence, rather than surprising anyone.

“It’s Todd, I’ve Ruby with me.” He shouted.

“We’re in the back room.” Yelled Max.

The room had the look of a place where something huge had happened, not that long ago. Dead bodies always grab your attention and there were three slung against a wall. Two looked to be enemy dead, with one of Max’s guards placed next to them. Max, as usual, dominated the room. He had an assault rifle in his hands and the boys lying on the floor behind him. Caleb had been shot, though why he’d been there at all.....Though that was something to clear up later on. Monique was dealing with a wound in Caleb’s shoulder, which didn’t look too bad. Judging by the amount of blood, the wound wasn’t a serious bleeder. Monique herself had a black and blue side to her face, as though she’d taken a beating. Again, all points for another day. Todd went straight towards the two dead enemy fighters.

“They won’t tell you much, I already went through their things.” Said Max. “Lightly tanned complexion that could come from anywhere. Unlikely to be Scandinavian or African, but apart from that they could be from anywhere. Nothing on them apart from extra ammunition and their weapons are made in Russia. As half the world uses Russian weapons, the doesn’t narrow things down much.”

“Sophie is trying to catch one alive.” Said Ruby.

“I’d forgotten your mental link, very useful.” Said Monique.

For a moment, Todd thought they were leaving, but it was just Ruby getting up to get a good look at Caleb. Poor Caleb, everyone was just beginning to like him and he had to catch a bullet. As it seemed they were there for a while, Todd sat next to Max and aimed his rifle at the door.

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George Polandrous had noticed that air travel was wonderful, as long as you weren’t in a hurry. Getting from Paris to London, should have been easy, but there were delays, there always seemed to be delays. Ruby had once teased him about buying his own executive jet. Oh no, he’d done one interview on Newsnight and people still shouted ‘capitalist bastard,’ at him on the street. George lived a modest lifestyle, mainly because he liked to live a quiet life. No yachts, no private jets, no expensive mistress in a villa on Mustique. Actually, the last one had been a temptation for a while, until Malou had come back into his life. But he’d decided a woman half his age might be bad for his heart.

After a few frantic calls and finding out Eurostar was having a bad night too. He’d sat in the airport departure lounge in Paris and read a book until the plane was finally ready to take off. In a way the delays might have been a good thing. By the time he arrived in London, the various people in uniforms had taken care of most of the mess, or at least made everything safe. Not that getting into his own building had been easy. George knew people though and a few calls had done wonders.

“We’re being cautious, they left explosives in several locations.”

The young policeman at the door had told him. Things had changed in the part of British intelligence run by Sir Edwin Fox, known as Sir to those who worked for him and Foxy to his friends. Foxy had a far wider remit these days and a larger pool of people to call on. George had never met Ronald Kelly, though the efficient sounding lady on the phone, had said he was one of their best. Ronald was waiting for him by the time George reached the elevator. Smart suit and shiny shoes, Ronald looked like a slightly younger version of Foxy.

“I’m Ronald Kelly, I believe they told you about me ?”

“Yes, they did.” Said George.

“Sorry to keep you out of your own building. It was the explosives they brought with them. Not exactly home made, but rare and not very stable. The kind of thing used in IEDs in the middle east. Nasty stuff, really nasty.”

Foxy’s department didn’t need a back door into the building’s security system, they’d been given their own admin level log on. George wasn’t surprised when the elevator happily took them up to his office. Actually, not really his office anymore, though he still used it when he was in London.

“They didn’t want to say on the phone.” Said George. “Are any of the attackers still alive ?”

“No, the team put the safety of Penny Green first. There are no surviving attackers. Don’t worry though, we already know who two of them are. Another hour and we’ll have names for all of them. By lunchtime we’ll be interviewing their nearest and dearest under caution.”

“Are they locals, Londoners I mean ?” Asked George.

“Sorry Mr Polandrous, but Foxy has asked me to refer those kinds of questions to him.”

The elevator gave its usual cheerful ding sound as the door opened. George hardly recognised the corridor outside his office. Bullet holes in walls wasn’t normal for what was still the financial heart of the world. Hedge fund company owners might get shouted at in the street, but no one had ever threatened violence. Actually, one or two had, but there was a vast difference between threats and having the ability to carry them out. He inwardly groaned as he saw the remnants of the hardwood desk, he’d treasured for about half his life.

“Your office isn’t pleasant.” Said Ron. “Though I’ve been told this isn’t the first blood you’ve seen.”  
“Sadly, you’ve been told right.”

It was Ruby of course, the rather unusual woman he thought of as a daughter. Attacks on office building were mercifully rare, but it hadn’t been the first time the Polandrous building had been attacked. There had even been two raids by special branch, both put down to misunderstandings. Life with Ruby around was never dull. On the other hand, his business had grown at least tenfold since she’d arrived as a twenty year old with some weird abilities.

“You’re right.....That is a lot of blood.” Said George.

“Do you want to leave ?”

“No, I’ve seen far worse.”

No bodies and no explosive, they would have all been taken away while he was reading his book in the departure lounge in Paris. Enough blood for half a dozen people, it coated the floor. Police forensics teams are old hands at dealing with such things, they’d placed what looked like carpet tiles in various places across the floor. Like stepping stones, they allowed Ron to lead him into the ruins of his old office.

“Our team were using normal stun grenades, but the attackers had something far dirtier. We’re still not sure what, but again....We suspect a middle eastern supplier. Most of the soot and burn marks are from the grenades they dropped.”

“Were any of your team hurt ?” Asked George.

“No, just a few minor cuts and bruises.”

At some point the sprinklers in the room had gone off, adding to the mess and damage. The door to the panic room was open. He already knew Penny hadn’t been seriously hurt, but the first paramedics to examine her had been worried about her mental state.

“She was in there for quite some time.” Foxy’s office had told him.

Penny never had been good with small spaces and that was without the worry of explosives and men with guns. George had arranged for her to be sent to a private hospital he’d used himself, after the trouble in Kazakhstan. He respected the NHS to deal with bread-and-butter medicine, but Penny would need somewhere quiet to rest, with her own bathroom and a bowl of fruit on the table. From his experience most London teaching hospitals were like trying to sleep at Paddington Station, on a busy day.

“Oh, poor Penny.” Said George. “She must have been terrified.”

“It took us a while to get her out.” Said Ron. “After all, these rooms are intended to keep everyone out. The camera was offline and Penny didn’t want to open the door. It all took too long....I’m sorry about that.”

“It was an unusual situation.” Said George. “After I leave here, I’m going to see Penny.”

“Tell her she’s a very brave lady.” Said Ron. “She survived Mr Polandrous, in a situation when many would have simply panicked and died.”

For some reason George shook hands with the man, he didn’t really know. That was the point of it though, or so he’d once heard. Shaking hands was all about offering friendship. A hand you were shaking couldn’t be carrying a blade.

“Call me George. How long until the police and assorted security people are out of here ?”

“I’m Ron.....Hmmm give it two days. Then you can get the builders in to repair the damage.”

On the way down in the elevator, George planned getting the office running again. Two floors had plenty of space and the water damage only seemed bad on the top floor. He’d have the place open again in a week, he had to. The London financial sector were worse than gossips over the garden

fence. Stay closed too long and the rumours would begin. Were Polandrous closing for good, or worse, were they being investigated by the tax people. No, no matter what, they had to be open for business in a week. The driver who'd picked him up at the airport knew him well. No opening the door for him, he knew George wasn't into all that nonsense. George got himself comfortable on the back seat.

"Do you remember the hospital I was at a while back, the one in Hertfordshire?"

"The private one near Borehamwood. Yes, I can remember the way."

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Eugenie had enjoyed the day doing all the touristy things. They'd seen all the must-see places and bought lots of the obligatory souvenirs. By the time they were back at Olga's, they were both at peak tourist brain. Yes, they really did feel they knew Budapest better than the local population. Eugenie knew it was a temporary mental aberration, so she went along with a few of Lol's more extreme statements.

"I mean, the average Budapestian knows their city, but they take it for granted. While we've just spent time letting the history soak into us."

"I agree, no one ever really knows their own city." She agreed.

She'd decided to tell him about herself and let him stay, if he wanted to. He might want to finish with her, but she had to tell him. Not all of it, there was too much and Lol might think she was pretending, or was some sort of compulsive liar. Eugenie had made her decision while walking around Heroes' Square. It might seem a bit theatrical, but a physical demonstration of her gifts, would speak volumes. There was no faking that kind of thing either.

"I love this vase, I'm glad we bought it." Said Lol.

It was the usual type of souvenir, probably made by the thousand in China and shipped in containers. You'd probably find the same vase in New York or Delhi, but she knew they'd treasure it. Souvenirs were all about triggering memories. It would also be the perfect object to use.

"I need to tell you something about myself." She said.

"Oh no, you're an influencer on Tik-Tok. I knew it, but I promise to love you anyway."

"It's easier to simply show you."

Eugenie placed the vase on the table under the window. A nice solid table made out of a dark wood, there could be no question of her having fixed it in any way.

"Don't damage it, I like that vase." Said Lol.

"I like it too. I promise it will come to no harm."

She looked at the vase and it was all so easy, compared to the first time Kallina had trained her to do it. Kallina never shouted at anyone for failing, she had a disappointed face, which was far worse than shouting. Eugenie imagined the vase rising into the air and it rose. She spun it around a few times, before gently placing it back on the table.

"Wow, my imagination was working overtime, but that....Can you show me again?" Asked Lol.

Good, he looked surprised, but not horrified. Eugenie lifted the vase and went through spinning it about. It wasn't enough, she wanted him staggered by what she could do. That way, he'd be more likely to believe everything else. Plus, Eugenie wanted Lol to be genuinely amazed. She touched the table in front of the vase.

"You will love this, keep your eye on the vase." She said.

It was the same basic idea of moving through solid walls. Vibrate the particles in the table just right and.....The vase fell through the solid table. She caught it with her mind and put it back where it had been. That was enough, Lol was having a genuine jaw dropping moment.

"I saw it, but I still don't believe it." He said. "How did you do that?"

"Oh, I have so much to tell you. Can we do it in stages?"

"Yes, of course. I did know there had to be something. You seem to be doing very well for someone your age. If you were a pop singer or selling crap on social media, I think I'd have noticed. This though, this is twilight zone stuff."

"Ok, big item out of the way first. I'm not quite human. Most of me is, you've seen me naked. There are other bits of DNA in me though, the ones that give me certain gifts. Does that....We'll it has to worry you a bit, it has to. Can you handle it Lol?"

"If you're wondering if I feel differently about you, I don't. I'd like to know more though, are there others like you?" Asked Lol.

"Let's take this slowly, in bite sized pieces." She said. "Yes, there are others like me, though there are only about thirteen of us, maybe fourteen if you count the baby."

"A baby....You have to tell me about the baby."

"Fine, we were all in North Korea....."

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"Admit it, Max." Said Charlie. "If we hadn't been here, you'd have never fought them off."

Max Krause wasn't ungrateful. It was unlikely that his wife and adopted sons would still be breathing, if Ruby's wunderkinds hadn't been in the compound. He still felt it necessary to point something out.

"You fought well, Charlotte. Though if Ruby hadn't brought you all here, I doubt it we'd have been attacked."

"Ignore him, I'm very grateful that you're here." Said Monique.

"I didn't say I wasn't....."

Max suspected he was just digging the hole deeper. Luckily the arrival of Ruby and Nari saved him from himself. Their attackers had arrived in force, at least twenty at the last count. Most were now dead and a grave pit was being dug. The three survivors had been told to talk, or join their colleagues in the pit. Then Ruby and Nari had arrived to talk to them. Max had first hand experience of Ruby's interrogation techniques. He almost felt sorry for the three surviving attackers.

"Did any of them talk?" Asked Monique.

"Oh wow, did they talk." Said Nari. "The real trick was getting them to go into details. They talked though; they're probably still talking."

"I didn't need to do any more than smile at them." Said Ruby. "They're a bandit group who usually operate on the border with Kenya. A man turned up, claiming to be an intermediary of some kind. He offered them a truly ridiculous sum of money to destroy this compound and kill everyone in it. It seems the bandits considered getting the money the easy way. They came close to trying to kill the intermediary and simply taking the money off his dead body."

"The only thing that stopped them, was that the four men with him, looked tough, really tough." Said Nari.

"Four tough guards with AR15s." Said Ruby. "Call me paranoid, but they sound like Gallaan to me."

"I think you're right." Said Max. "You really do seem to have annoyed Gallaan Industries."

Lily wandered up, limping slightly. Max had seen Lily firing at their attackers with an old handgun. His respect for her had increased when the man she was firing at, had gone down and hadn't got up. A bullet had nicked her thigh, but she'd live.

"I think I'm the one who annoyed them." Said Lily. "Caleb will be alright by the way, the bullet missed anything vital."

"We have to leave here." Said Ruby. "We got lucky; it seems the intermediary gave these guys enough of a deposit for them to get drunk for three solid days. Next time, Gallaan might just bomb the compound out of existence."

"I agree, we pack up and leave today." Said Max. "We use the plan we've been talking about. We'll go to Aden; I know people there."

"Oh crap, back to the Yemen." Said Monique. "We can't take the boys. Where will they go?"

"They'll be fine with us; we can't leave them here." Said Max.

"But.....Todd said he knew someone." Said Monique.

"Max is right, they have to come with us." Said Ruby. "They'll be safer with us, at least until we decide where to go from the Yemen."

"So, no fast helicopter trip to from Aden to Saudi Arabia?" Asked Sophie.

"That was only one of several options." Said Max. "I have a fast patrol boat, bought from a Russian admiral after a card game.....He lost."

"Yeah, right." Said Anna.

"He's telling the truth, I was there." Said Monique.

"There are refuelling places along the Somali coast." Said Max. "They were put in place just in case there was a need to make an escape from Mogadishu. Once we get to Aden, we can decide what to do next."

"We know what to do, we head towards Norway." Said Kallina.

Max had seen Kallina use her gifts on the enemy, but she'd seemed to be drained very quickly. The last he'd seen of her, she'd been curled up in a ball, as if sleeping. He was hoping that she'd be back to her old form, before they reached Norway.

"I agree, but let's do it in stages. We'll use the patrol boat to reach Aden." Said Max.

"Families don't belong in wars." Said Monique. "I'm still worried about the boys."

"We'll look after them." Said Sophie.

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George had stopped on the way, to buy flowers and a basket of fruit. The flowers were a good idea, but the fruit had been a mistake. The fruit bowl in the room had far better-looking grapes than those he was carrying. He'd been worried about visiting hours being over, but it seemed there were no set visiting hours. Turn up at midnight and there might have been a few cross words, but other than that, you just turned up when you wanted. Penny was sat up in bed, looking a bit pale.

"George.....You just missed two young men from special branch."

His fruit basket was placed well away from the fruit bowl, while he put the flowers on Penny's bedside cabinet. George pulled forward a chair, which squeaked as it moved.

"I was so worried Penny." He said. "I know Ruby has a knack of making enemies, but I had no idea anyone would try and kill you."

"Ruby was trying to help a friend, George." Said Penny. "I know she seems to attract trouble, but she means well. I won't hear a word against the girl."

George held Penny's hand. He knew the HR lady wouldn't approve, but to hell with the HR lady, he'd known Penny for years.

"How are you?" He asked. "The nurse said you had a cracked rib."

"A cracked rib and a bump on the head. Nothing to do with the attackers, not really. When the lights went out on the screen, I jumped back. Hit my head on something and fell over. My ribs caught the edge of something as I went down. The next panic room needs to be larger, with less things to bump into."

"I've cracked a few ribs. Painful and they take ages to heal."

"I'm not complaining, the leader of the attackers said I'd end up as a smudge on the pavement in Bishopsgate. He sounded like a Londoner by the way, they all did. They knew each other too, they seemed really upset when the woman was shot. I have told the police all of this and special branch. Now.....Pass me your fruit basket."

Penny ate the grapes he'd bought, which made him irrationally happy. It was seeing her again, damaged but alive. When the phone call had come when he was in Paris.....He'd assumed the worst. "One of Foxy's new people told me they'd be talking to the attackers' relatives by lunchtime." He said. "That means they must be locals. He could hardly say that if they were a firm operating out of somewhere abroad."

"That makes sense, George. You need to find a way of letting Ruby know about all this. Todd was in touch with Monique, who seems good at that sort of thing."

"I will make sure Ruby knows everything. One way or another I will get a message to her, even if I have to take it myself."

"I was waiting for you to say that. Leave battles to the youngsters George."

They found an old film they both liked on the hospital's cable service. He had lots to do, but George spent a happy two hours watching that old black and white film. Penny had been right though. Battles were for the young. That didn't mean he couldn't help from a safe distance.

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Olga was determined not to let their meeting run over into dinner. There would be no muddling of the work and business times in her house. They were going to decide what to do next about Gallaan and what needed to be done about Flex's family. Families were a nuisance if they were yours, Olga had detested hers. If they were someone else's, it doubled the annoyance. Still, with Flex looking like a new member of her select group, she could hardly keep his family locked up in a building in the middle of being renovated. It seemed Flex's kid sister had developed allergies to brick dust. Annoyance, families were always nothing but an annoyance. So far, just sorting out accommodation for the family Rusinek, had taken up half an hour of the hour set aside.

"I am offering to put them up in a four-star hotel, and foot the bill." Said Olga.

"We keep coming back to their safety." Said Flex. "They'll be safe here, with your people to guard them. My parents will be no trouble and the kids will be in the pool all day. You'll never know they're here."

People always viewed their own family through rose coloured glasses, always. The Rusineks would turn out to be a dumpster fire, Olga knew it. She needed Flex though, he'd proven himself to be useful. As he was threatening to vanish, taking his family with him.....

"Alright, they can live here." She said. "There will be strict rules though, about who they give my address to. And of course, what they can tell to those outside of our group."

"They're used to my life, Olga." Said Flex. "Trust me, they know how to keep things confidential, even Munchkin. She talks a lot, but never really says a lot."

Munchkin was his pet name for his baby sister. It wasn't the worst she'd heard, one of her guys called his kid sister She-Devil.

"Alright, you've won me over. Anything they break though.....It's coming out of your pay."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

Judging by the vibe coming from the other two people at the meeting, Eugenie had told Lorenzo about not being a hundred percent human. Olga really hadn't envied her that conversation. They were holding hands though, so it must have gone well. So, Olga now didn't have to watch what she



said around Lorenzo. On the other hand, she was going to have four barely welcome house guests, who had no idea about her business, or much else for that matter.

"A dumpster fire, bound to be." She mumbled.

"What fire?" Asked Eugenie.

"Never mind, we need to discuss what will be our next move against Gallaan." Said Olga.

"Did the lawyers find anything juicy?" Asked Flex.

Olga passed just one piece of paper to each of them, a kind of synopsis of the key finds in amongst terabytes of data. Eugenie did a kind of whistle through her teeth.

"Your lawyers are curious about weapons known by codewords, being sold to people known by codewords, in Scandinavia. We know who that is, it's Ishel and her rogues. If we simply give all this data to the authorities, they'll work it out. We can't allow that to happen."

"Who is Ishel?" Asked Lol.

"Guardian Ishel to give her full title. I'll fill you in on the details later." Said Eugenie.

They all read the list for a while, it was like a long and involved summary of some truly terrible deals for all kinds of unpleasant weapons. Mainly traditional weapons, but some of the codeword transactions sounded like bio-weapons. All the crates of high-tech weapons to Scandinavia were probably energy weapons being sold to Ruby's nemesis. After reading it through several times, Olga looked around the other three people at the table.

"Alright, we can rule out sending all this to the FBI, or MI6." She said. "There must be a way to use it to shut down Gallaan. Any ideas? Don't worry if it sounds a bit wild, we should consider anything."

Lol was so wonderfully polite, actually putting his hand up. Olga nodded in his direction.

"Brute force can be effective." He said. "I'm no expert, but hire enough mercenaries and attack enough of their buildings and you'll finish them as an effective organisation."

"That would be expensive, but it would work." Said Eugenie. "Not very clandestine though, the police forces of several nations would be after us."

"I think we keep that as our plan D, in case plans A to C don't work out." Said Olga.

"Hmmm we could use that idea, but get someone else's army to do it." Said Flex. "My idea is a bit unscrupulous; I guarantee you won't like it."

"If we'd known each other longer, you'd know that I thrive on unscrupulous. Out with-it Fletcher Xavier Rusinek, tell us your idea?"

Flex was pointing at a line on the page, a rather unpromising item about a row between Gallaan and the Russian military, over a shipment that hadn't turned up.

"Can you look up file RUS07045 on your laptop?" Asked Flex. "I just want to confirm my suspicions."

"Fine, I can do that." Said Olga.

She found the page and spun her laptop around, so that Flex could see it.

"Yeah....I thought so. Lawyers look for legal problems and accountants look for financial errors. This is a matter of trust and losing face. Plus, the amount in question is close to a billion American dollars."

"Well, that's enough to get anyone angry." Said Lol.

"So, you want to start a feud between the Russians and Gallaan." Said Olga. "I can see how that would work."

"More than a feud, we can foment a full-blown vendetta." Said Flex. "The data we have is verifiable, so they'll believe whatever comes attached to it. We use fake documents to show Gallaan sold the weapons to the Chinese and decided to keep the Russian money anyway. Hint at Gallaan dealing exclusively with China in the future and.....I guarantee the Russians will have no sense of humour

about the matter. They will use some severe and inventive ways to punish Gallaan. The question is whether we want to unleash that severe punishment ?”

Four faces looking at her, with Eugenie nodding, while the rest looked uncommitted. No holding a vote, that kind of thing could lead to all sorts of expectations in the future.

“I could give you Ruby’s speech about not being a democracy.” Said Olga. “Dinner has already been moved on to a later time, so I’m saying we will use Flex’s idea. We’ll need a cut off person and an agent none of us have ever dealt with. I can provide a cut off.....Any ideas on an agent known to deal with anything and anyone if the money is right ?”

Olga expected Flex to have half a dozen names, but it was Lol’s voice coming across the table.

“I know a man, he occasionally works for my father, so I can’t see him. He’s the kind who’d sell his own grandmother if the price was right.”

Which brought up the thought that Lol’s family might not be that honest and pure after all. Not that Olga cared, Eugenie was obviously going to marry the young man. Olga could tell and anyway, Eugenie wouldn’t have told him her biggest secret, if she hadn’t intended to marry him, or at least keep him around for a hell of a long time.

“He sounds just what we need.” Said Olga. “We’ll have dinner now and finalise our plans in the morning.”

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When she’d heard the phrase Russian patrol boat, Sarah had imagined something like the boat they’d once used to cross the Black Sea, stopping at ports in Turkey to refuel. Not that Sarah had hated the that boat, her feelings had gone well beyond normal hatred. The engines had been loud and it had managed to make her feel sea sick for days. That boat had a knack of bouncing about and swerving around, at the slightest swell. Sarah had hated it so much; she’d never even given it a pet name. Even the weapons had been dreadful. Old World War Two deck cannons that needed huge amounts of maintenance, in the hope they might work when needed.

“Oh, I like this.....I like this a lot.” She said.

Sarah had seen the boat tied up on the jetty and assumed Max was leading them towards something else. He’d turn a corner and there it would be, the rusty hulk waiting to take them to Aden. The patrol boat looked more like a private yacht, though it was obviously well armed. Sarah could only guess at what some of the protruding ironmongery did, but it all screamed lethality. There was space too, lots and lots of space. No sea sickness either, the boat hadn’t even wobbled as they’d all stepped onto the deck. They knew each other well, as she put her hand out, Spider held it.

“This is great.” She said. “You can probably guess what I was expecting.”

“Not all boats are as bad as that patrol boat in the Black Sea.” Said Spider.

“Come on, we need to help unload the trucks.” She said.

Sarah had a new spring in her step, which Max obviously noticed.

“So Sarah, you approve of my patrol boat ?” He asked.

“Oh yes, very much so. What happened to the admiral who lost it in a card game ?”

“Two days later he was recalled to Moscow.”

Max ran his forefinger over his throat, in a meaningful way.

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