

Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

Chapter 8 – Max Krause

“Todd knocked on the door of Ruby’s room. She’d known he was on the Ajax; he could tell. A certain look in those gorgeous dark eyes. The real giveaway was no surprise. Once he was through the door, her lips went for his.”

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Kallina was feeling almost her old self, after all the blood transfusions and Luca’s excellent care. Still not totally fighting fit, though Ruby was hoping Max was still an ally. An ally who hadn’t done much to combat their common enemy, but still an ally. With luck, Kallina still had a while to rest and heal, before fighting was required.

“I was told you wanted to see me.” Said Caleb.

“Yes, drag over a chair and sit beside me.”

His mind intrigued her, all the gaps and wildly contradictory memories. Sibling who’d died, but in reality, had never been born. Caleb was a man who’d suffered, even seeing the brutal death of the woman he loved. Most of it was garbage, false memories used to blanket real ones, with layers of emotional turmoil. Ask him directly about his family and he’d tell you about his parents. He’d mention an older brother and a younger sister. Go for the same memories by asking about family holidays in his early teens and the brother was always there. The sister though, she simply didn’t exist in any of his memories of the vacations he’d been on with his parents. Point out the discrepancy and he’d have an extreme emotional response, often leading to a period of crying. Ruby and Charlotte had stopped pointing out his contradictory memories.

“It just seems so pointlessly cruel.” Charlotte had said.

Several skilled interrogators had messed with the inside of Caleb’s mind, mostly using drugs and sleep deprivation. Pictures of extreme violence too by the sound of it, his memories of his lover’s death were incredibly vivid. Someone had used pain on him, his body still had scars from low level torture. They weren’t really helping him, as Ruby had realised.

“All we’re doing is adding another layer of memories.” She’d said. “We think of what we’re telling him as corrections. In reality we’re just adding to the confusion in his mind. In the end he may stop believing in reality and enter a permanent catatonic state. You’re curious about him Kallina, look into his mind for me. I instinctively don’t trust him, which I know is ridiculously subjective. Dig, delve into his memories and tell me if he’s worth the trouble of taking him with us ?”

Not that Caleb would be killed if he wasn’t worth all the effort of dragging him across the globe. Kallina had realised a long time ago, that Ruby’s methods were often close to those of their enemies. They differed in several key points though, like being loyal to everyone in their weird dysfunctional family. Another key difference was that no one was considered to be expendable. The worst that might happen to Caleb was waking up in the lounge of Nairobi airport, with some money in his pocket and a plane ticket to Tel Aviv. Of course, he’d have no memories of anything since being imprisoned in Belgium.

“Are you of any use to us, Caleb ?” Kallina asked.

“Truthfully, I don’t know. Is there a way I could be useful ?”

His mind was a patchwork, like a bed quilt made of lots of different pieces. She could see why Ruby had taken against him, he wasn't a nice man, not even slightly. Beneath the implanted memories was a scam artist, someone who'd turned on anyone who'd ever trusted him. Caleb came first in all his thoughts. His only check on criminal behaviour, was the likelihood of being caught and punished. He was thoroughly unlikeable, but so were many of the people Ruby was happy to work with. Max was probably a hair's breadth from being a psychopath.

"If I say Ruby, what is the first word that comes into your head?" She asked.

"Protection."

"Charlotte?"

"Fear, pain."

"Me, Kallina?"

"Witch."

Good, he'd obviously heard something about her from the others. Kallina was thinking of a non-wunderkind way of dealing with the Caleb problem. A solution that relied of witchcraft rather than their gifts.

"There is talk about you having a secret in your mind, one worth a fortune, Caleb. What do you think about that?"

"Absolute nonsense."

Whoever had planted the instant dismissal as a reaction, had gone too far. The number of people treating him like a billion dollars on legs, couldn't have gone unnoticed. It would have been more natural if he'd shown a normal level of curiosity. If someone didn't want him thinking about a great secret, there had to be one. Caleb was worth saving, from his borderline sociopathic tendencies.

"I have an idea Caleb, one to make you more acceptable to Ruby and her friends. You will be loyal and if Ruby puts a gun in your hand, you won't turn on her. I can also add a little something, so that you won't run away at the first sign of danger. Once this business has been dealt with, I can put you back to being the dreadful person you are now."

"That's not very nice." Said Caleb. "How would you do it?"

"Witchcraft, I can use spells on you to change your personality. I can change you back afterwards, or leave you in the new braver, bolder and more trustworthy version of Caleb Friedman. There is a term for computers, about reflashing the BIOS. I can reflash your BIOS, Caleb. Then you'll be the new you, forever. All this has to be agreed to though, by you. Are you willing to let me make a few changes to your personality?"

"Do I have to decide now?"

"Yes, you do."

"A psychiatrist once told me you can't change someone's personality."

"Psychiatrists are all fools.....Do we do this, or are you leaving us?"

"Do it Kallina, do it now."

"Alright, get on the floor. Lie down and close your eyes."

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Todd thought Ruby must have known he was on the ship. Sophie had the whole keeping a secret thing going on, but she'd obviously been happy to see him. Gone was quiet Sophie, she'd even squealed as she'd hugged him. If Ruby hadn't picked all that up, she'd have to be the worst empath on the planet, which she wasn't. He'd dropped his equipment, bags and weapons on the floor.

"Can I leave my stuff here?" He asked. "Just for a while, I promise."

"Of course you can. I'll push it all into a corner."

“Oh, almost forgot.”

Ruby’s passion for chocolate covered Brazil nuts hadn’t diminished. He took a box of them out of his bag. Another thank you for her help and a kiss on the cheek for Sophie.

“Erm.... Which room is she in ?” He asked.

“Turn right out of my room, then last door on the left.”

He was worried about needing a shower after travelling, before remembering the journey had taken a fraction of a second. Todd knocked on the door of Ruby’s room. She’d known he was on the Ajax; he could tell. A certain look in those gorgeous dark eyes. The real giveaway was no surprise. Once he was through the door, her lips went for his.

“I’ve missed you so much.” Said Ruby.

“Constanze sends her love and I brought these.”

The Brazils went on top of the set of drawers. It hadn’t actually been that long since they’d shared a bed, it just felt like it had been a while. The ship was hot, they were travelling along the east coast of Africa. Ruby wasn’t wearing much and what she’d been wearing, was soon on the cabin floor.

“Catch ups later.” He said. “Right now, I want to kiss every bit of you.”

She’d been busy on his clothes too, everything unbuttoned, his belt undone. As he stepped out of his trousers, Ruby led him over to the bed. How she’d removed his boxer shorts was a mystery, but he was completely naked as his hands explored her body.

“Is this just a visit ?” Asked Ruby.

“You’re stuck with me, I’m one of the team now.” He said.

“Good.”

The bed in the Hackney flat smelled of her perfume, though it was fading. The cabin smelled of her, the bed smelled of her. His dick was huge, but he was determined to put off entering her. He knew that the longer the foreplay, the better the sex. There had been times when Ruby had been impatient and mounted him, but those times were rare. Like him, she enjoyed the kissing, the touching, the anticipation. As he began to use his tongue on her nipples, he noticed something.

“You’ve been sunbathing.....I love the white bits.”

Her skin was dark anyway, but there were definite lighter areas where her bikini had kept the sun off her intimate places. It was if the untanned parts were erotic sign posts, saying here we are. Normally he’d have spent longer getting there, but he couldn’t wait. His head went down, enjoying the wonderful aroma of roused woman. As his tongue went in deep, he heard Ruby sigh with pleasure.

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Sarah had never visited Mogadishu before, she doubted if any of the wunderkinds had either. She was beginning to realise that nowhere is quite what you expect, but Somalia was never likely to get on the map as a tourist destination. Calaso had been there of course, as had her brother. Neither of them had ever arrived in the city by ship. They knew the layout of the place though, the places to see and the places to seriously avoid.

“Ruby told me about Max and his compound.” Calaso had told her. “It’s really in a small town a few kilometres out of Mogadishu, a place called Afgoye. A very old town, one of the oldest in Somalia. Afgoye is a farming town, lots of green field. You will like it there, Sarah. Be careful though, you look different and they don’t like things that look different.”

Blonde hair, skinny and a tendency to wear short skirts with crop tops. Sarah knew she looked the archetypal spoiled western woman, but she had merged into the crowd in Marrakesh on a few occasions. Not that there was any real comparison between Marrakesh and Mogadishu.

“I’ll be fine, Calaso. You’d be amazed at how many out of the way places I’ve been to.”

Mogadishu was currently sweltering in the African sunshine. Thirty-one degrees and about seventy seven percent humidity, according to the guy who'd served their breakfast. Ships don't move quickly, which was actually nice. The port of Mogadishu had been just a few buildings on the coast after breakfast. Now Sarah could make out what looked like an old castle and a sandy foreshore. All of it slowly giving them time to look the place over, before they arrived.

"The docks are the worst part." Said Calaso. "There are always very bad people at the docks, dangerous people."

"We're being met and some of those with us can be quite dangerous too." Said Sarah.

The docks slowly came into view and for the most part, docks are fairly universal. High cranes and a stack of containers. Not for their grain though, Captain Sargsyan had told them his cargo was in sacks. A long line of men would physically carry the sacks from his ship to the warehouse. The smells of a busy port, took Sarah back to her time in Baku. Things had seemed so much simpler then, before they'd known there might be others out there, people like Ruby.

"Those must be our taxis." Said Sarah.

The three old trucks close to where the Ajax was going to berth, looked like something out of a military convoy. They looked old, though to Sarah, all trucks painted green all over, looked like something left over from the second world war. Leaning on the trucks were about a dozen armed men. Olga had hired them and they'd been paid well. Their one and only task was to deliver Ruby and her friends safely to Max's compound. After that they'd probably go back to people smuggling, or transporting drugs.

"Your taxi drivers look like bad people." Said Calaso.

"Yeah, they probably are." Said Sarah. "They've been paid to get us safely to Afgoye."

Olga had been right and Ruby had been right to listen to her. Hiring transport in the busy docks would have been a nightmare. There might have even been some risk and they'd definitely have been ripped off. The loud people offering all kinds of services, began as they left the relatively calm atmosphere of the Ajax. Hiring trucks with drivers in advance was a wonderful plan. Them and all their belongings, were safely in the trucks within a few minutes. A quick goodbye to the crew of the ship and they were driving at an alarming speed through the streets of Mogadishu. Sarah could speak Somali; she could speak just about every language. But, she let Calaso act as their interpreter. The young girl needed to feel useful and not just be the sister of the new super person in the group. Calaso talked to the driver, as he took a corner at a suicidal speed.

"He says we need to be out of the city and heading north, before the gangs realise rich westerners are in the area."

Sarah had never thought of herself as rich and most of the thirteen would have laughed at the idea of being westerners. The idea made sense though, get out of town before the bad guys had a chance to wake up.

"Then tell him to hurry." Said Sarah.

The driver swore a little, though Calaso only translated the clean bits.

"He says he will."

Just one straight road and they didn't have to go far. The road was bad though, not a road to use if you didn't have a sturdy vehicle and nerves of steel. Their driver nearly took the front off a Citroen van in the village of Lafoole. A huge barrage of bad language ensued, which seemed the usual local way to solve driving disputes. It was dreadful in so many ways, but Sarah was beginning to enjoy herself.

"Never a dull moment." She said.

“You wait Sarah, this is a quiet day on a main road.”

They were in the second truck; Ruby was in the one at the front of the small convoy. Sarah knew they were there, when the front truck stopped outside of a compound with walls over fifteen feet high, topped with razor wire. Solid metal gates too, the people inside obviously valued their privacy. The gates opened just enough for an armed man to come out and talk to the people in the truck. A few moments later, the gates opened all the way. There was a notice on the wall, next to the gate. Sarah noticed the compound was the supposed headquarters of Gervex Logistics. That might mean nothing, just a convenient name. Or it might mean that Monique was playing an important part in Max’s empire. Sarah’s first sensation once they were through the gates, was the smell of coffee. Proper coffee, combined with the aroma of fresh bread.

“It’s a large compound.” Said Calaso.

“I’m sure we’ll get the official tour. Firstly though, I want some of that coffee I can smell.”

Sarah hadn’t seen Max for a while, none of them had. Her main memory of him was of an angry man, a very angry man. He had been imprisoned twice by Kallina though and once by British intelligence. Get dropped down a hole in one of the ex-colonies and Sarah could see why he’d been angry. The Max talking to Ruby was recognisable, just. He looked older, though they were all getting gradually older. Max had a slight stoop and he was laughing. Max laughing and it wasn’t because he’d shot someone. It was going to take some getting used to. Sarah caught the end of Max’s conversation with Ruby.

“.....If you’d let us know. We could have arranged for my people to pick you up. I’ll get the guest house ready, we’ve plenty of space. You should have said you were coming. You’ll see the boys soon; Monique has taken them into town.”

The mention of boys stopped Ruby in her tracks and Sarah made a comment out loud, that she’d intended to stay in her head.

“The boys Max, have you got children ?” Asked Sarah.

His age, Monique’s age....Sarah was doing the math in her head and it was unlikely, though not impossible.

“My sons yes, our sons.” Said Max. “There is so much poverty here. We felt the need to do something, so we adopted two local children. Foundlings, left outside the mosque one night. Dreadful....Dreadful. They have a good home now though.”

The new Max was definitely going to take some getting used to. The old Max had killed Monique’s husband, before claiming her as some kind of victor’s spoils. He’d obviously been doing his own shuffle through old memories.

“Sarah, yes I remember now. Didn’t you once try and shoot me with a huge cannon of a gun ?”

“Yes, I seem to remember that. Did I miss ?”

Max was laughing, he actually hugged her. Either it was all an act, or.....Yes, the new Max was going to take some fucking getting used to.

“Any chance of some of that coffee I can smell ?” Asked Ruby.

“Yes, there’s always food in the dining area.” Said Max.

Max led, like some doting uncle meeting his favourite nieces and nephews. Ruby shrugged at her, obviously as staggered by the new Max as her.

“Prozac, got to be.” Muttered Sophie.

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The flight from Budapest had left and arrived on time, in itself a bit of a miracle. Pure luck being in Paris, though it gave her time to see Malou and get treated as a favourite niece by George. In a way

it was better being there after the others had left, she had the room Ruby usually used. She didn't want to admit to loving all the fuss and welcomes, but it was nice, really nice. Even the normally taciturn Xue had given her a smile and a few bits of gossip. No boyfriend with her, Lorenzo had been left in Olga's mansion. The pool and just about every game for every games console on the market. He was going to have a wonderful two or three days. So, it was just her and Flex, though Olga had offered her several of her guys to use as muscle.

"There's Xue and I can ask Villand for a couple of people to watch my back." She'd told Olga. Eugenie trusted Olga completely, but her people could be a bit brutal. Plus, Eugenie wanted to use locals where possible. Paris felt like home, she had been born there. If there was anything murky going on, she'd deal with it locally. Xue had dropped them off near the office building, people were used to seeing him in the business district. She stood next to Flex, staring up at an impressive looking building, lots of glass and greenery in planters. Everything was green, clean and shiny.

"You're sure this is where Gallaan have their headquarters?" She asked.

"Yes, Eugenie, it is." Said Flex. "I did a few jobs for them, mostly interrogations. They have offices in London and Berlin, plus the obligatory holding company in the British Virgin Islands. There's even an empty office with a chair in it, as their supposed management office in Jersey. Add on an office or two in the USA and Gallaan have an impressive set of addresses. This is the place though, Gallaan central. Two rented floors, the top floor and the penthouse. Oh, that Penthouse....Very impressive. I only spent time there once and I could live there, permanently. The main people are here, the decision makers. Trust me, I know my trade...This is where we need to be."

Rented made it sound unlikely to be their genuine head office, though in a way it made sense. All that expensive real estate right round the globe, with the main team located in two rented floors in Paris. It made sense; it was like Ruby with her flat in Hackney.

"We'll look the place over, camera angles and all the usual stuff." She said. "If it looks feasible, we'll go up to Gallaan's floors right away. We're up against the clock on this."

"Today?" Said Flex. "We agreed to do a casual walk round on the first visit. You can delve into the minds of a few of the staff coming and going. You can manage that can't you?"

"Yes, of course I can manage that." She snapped. "I'm just saying, that if things look promising, we'll go up to the penthouse right away."

He had no real choice, he had to follow her into the building's foyer. His family were still enjoying Olga's hospitality. No one was going to harm them, but he didn't need to know that. The threat was always there, lurking quietly in the background.

"There are cameras in at least eight places." Said Flex.

"They know your face already." She said. "These are likely to be the cameras for the company who own the building. They might be connected to a super-fast AI, but I doubt it. I'd have felt the commotion recognising you would have caused..... Trust me, I know my trade."

He grinned at her and she grinned back. They were never going to be friends, but kept on a tight leash, he was going to be useful. Eugenie did a quick pass across the front of the reception desk and picked up, nothing at all. Key words worked well and dozens of people a day probably came in to see Gallaan Industries.

"Are Gallaan in this building? I didn't see a nameboard." She asked.

"Yes, are you here for an interview? If you have their letter, I can book you in."

"I'm ridiculously early, just to make sure I found the place." Said Eugenie.

"Oh, I do that too." Said the receptionist. "Come back when you're ready. There are drinks machines at the rear of the lobby."

There were and several areas where they could sit without being overheard. Eugenie already knew the stairs and elevators had key pads to allow access to the Gallaan parts of the building. Unsurprisingly, the receptionist didn't know the numbers. Not that a simple coded key pad was much of a challenge. The woman on the desk, had other things on her mind though, which the name Gallaan had triggered.

"Did you get anything?" Asked Flex.

"One of the senior people at Gallaan is dead. She liked him; he was nice to her at the Christmas party. Does the name Conrad Millar ring a bell?"

"Yes, though he wasn't that senior. He paid me and dealt with my queries. How did he die?"

"A home invasion gone wrong; he was shot. Might be genuine, or someone is tidying up loose ends." Eugenie sipped the coffee from the machine, which didn't taste too bad. It didn't taste at all like coffee, but at least it was palatable.

"I haven't got your skills, but I pick things up." Said Flex. "Half intuition and half something else, something my mum calls freaky. I saw a man and a woman at this Gallaan office. I was never given names, but I know they're the two top people. I'm never wrong by the way, never. I believe they're lovers. If you want to lobotomise anyone, they're the two to go for."

"Not permanently Flex, I'll just give them a dose of brain fog from hell. A few months and they'll be fine. It should put Gallaan on the back foot for a while. I take it you can recognise them?"

"Oh, yes."

"Come on then.....Stairs or elevator?"

"We're going now?"

"Yes....Come on....Stairs or elevator?"

"Stairs."

Eugenie had her own plan B, as they ran up the stairs. It had to be the stairs really, there might well be a camera in the elevator. The security guy monitoring the systems might be half asleep, but he'd probably notice her hacking the keypad. Flex was fit, he hadn't asked her to slow down, not even once. By the time they reach the locked door, she'd decided to let him know her plan B.

"Here, the cameras from here are likely to be theirs." She said.

Olga had given her the hockey masks, she had boxes of them. Cheap masks with an elastic strap to hold it on your face. The type of thing teenager wore at Halloween parties.

"You're kidding." Said Flex.

"Look, it'll be nice if we could find this couple you saw." She said. "Realistically I'm looking at plan B. If we don't find them pretty quickly, I'll hit their offices. By hit, I mean leaving it so the police are still digging through the debris a month later."

"You can do that?"

"Yes I can, though I'll set off the fire alarm first. When the staff are clear, I'll turn the top floor and the penthouse, to rubble."

"Jeez." Said Flex, while fixing his mask in place.

Eugenie carried a natty little silver bag everywhere, a genuine Gucci. It was one of her most prized possessions, especially as Ruby had bought it for her. A pretty girl, with a natty little bag. No one had ever asked her what was in it, probably assuming it was the usual things girls thought were essential. The bag held her keys, some tissues, and an emergency fifty euro note. It also contained a gun. If it came to it, she would use it. She fitted her mask and examined the keypad on the door.

"Oh, almost an insult." She muttered.

Kallina had taught her about locks and then Spider had given her the opportunity to do it for real. The first keypad had taken her several minutes to open, but Spider was patient and supportive. Plus, he was quite capable of thumping anyone who might get a bit miffed at her fiddling with their locks. After lots of practise and a few bad experiences, she could now open most keypads in less than a minute. The door opened after about forty seconds.

“Voila.” She said, with a bow.

Eugenie was already in plan B mode. She ignored the door to the Gallaan offices and carried on up to the penthouse. A fire was needed, even if only a small fire. That would set off the alarms and everyone would be outside in a few minutes. Efficiency meant starting her small and controllable fire, at the very top of the building. She stopped at the door leading into the penthouse. The gun came out of her bag. Not a huge gun, the same type of gun Ruby used. A Glock 32, with a modified grip and a clip that held fourteen rounds. Flex was staring at the gun.

“Just for intimidation.” She said. “People tend to get out of the way, if you wave a gun in their direction. Using it is an absolute last resort. Are you alright with that ?”

“Yeah, no problem.” Said Flex.

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Much to her annoyance, Kallina had allowed herself to be carried out of the truck. On a stretcher, as if she was still the helpless ruined creature of bones and decay.

“It makes things easier, please don’t make a thing about it.” Ruby had said. “Just think of the shock when Max sees you in his compound.”

As if she ever made a huge thing about anything. She could see the fun though, in appearing in front of Max. As far as him and his people were concerned, the woman on the stretcher was one of Ruby’s guards, who’d been injured on the way.

“I’ll pop up in front of him like a Jack in a box.” She muttered.

She’d imprisoned Max for years, deep under the ground in some ruins in the Yemen. His only light had been a few cracks in the walls. She’d fed him well and provided him with bottled water. Cold food of course, straight out of tins. Poor Max, he really had developed a deep hatred for tinned baked beans. Max Krause was a pro though, he probably still was. He’d be shocked at seeing her, but she’d have bet anything he’d be cool about her being there. Cool.....What a strange expression, she’d picked it up while teaching the thirteen. To them everything nice, pleasant or enjoyable was cool. They were younger then though; she hoped their vocabulary had expanded a little. Ruby walked into her room, without knocking.

“Well....At least you’re dressed now.” Said Ruby.

“I had wanted my first dinner party to have been more.....Relaxed.” Said Kallina.

“You’ll be fine and we can’t be late. Monique has allowed the boys to stay up late, but only until they’ve been introduced to everyone.”

“Max with children, the world really is headed for hell in a hand cart.” Said Kallina. “I told him not to get Monique pregnant.”

“They boys are adopted.” Said Ruby. “Local kids, foundlings.”

“I know Ruby, I know.....They’re going to be his children, with his values; and hers. As if the world didn’t have enough problems.”

“Come on Kallina, can you walk alright ?”

“I’ll manage, Ruby. I’m certainly not going in there, leaning on you.”

Kallina had kept up with the gossip, Sophie and Charlie had been in to see her several times, always with tantalising hints about Max being a new man. He’d adopted two boys and given them local

names, out of respect for their culture. Not babies, Damu and Enki were toddlers, with Damu the slightly older of the two. Why hadn't Max been hunting down the renegade Das Geheimnis ? There had been too much to do in Mogadishu, too many relying on him for help. Not that Kallina believed any of it. Max was rotten to the core, with no regard for the welfare of anyone but himself. She doubted if he had any genuine feelings for Monique. He could be useful of course. All ruthless people could be useful. Max had been born in the wrong age. As a knight on horseback, or a crusader, he'd have been a hero. Now he was just a sociopath who needed to be kept away from civilised people. Mogadishu had seemed the perfect place to set him up with a new life.

"You must be able to tell, Ruby. Is he genuine ?" Asked Kallina. "He can't really be a reformed character, can he ?"

Kallina hated to do it, but the walk to the dining hall was longer than she'd thought. She leaned on Ruby, just to ease the pressure on her hips a little. Some parts of her seemed to be slower to heal than others.

"I only got a few moments alone with him." Said Ruby. "The darkness is still there, deep inside him. It will never go, but Max has convinced himself it has. He believes he's changed, which is probably a good thing. Self-delusion of course, but if a bad man can be used to do good things.....Convince Max a cause is a just one and he'd march into hell for you."

"If you intend to get him to attack hell, I can tell you where it is." Said Kallina.

Ruby laughed, as though it was a joke.

"No, I mean it, I know where Ishel has taken her rogues. I felt them while I was waiting to heal. They were like an itch I couldn't reach to scratch. Constantly there, I picked up many of their thoughts. Norway somewhere, an island just off the coast. Get me to Norway and I could probably tell you exactly where they are. For what it's worth, they don't seem to be causing any trouble."

"We both know Ishel and her rogues will never settle for a quiet life." Said Ruby.

"So, you're saying that sometimes the end justifies the means ?" Asked Kallina.

"Careful, we're close enough to be overheard." Muttered Ruby.

They were all in the dining area, probably waiting for her. They all actually applauded when she entered the room, including Max and Monique. They weren't expecting her, but the word must have reached him by now. Max smiled at her and she sensed genuine warmth behind his smile. Could someone pretending to be good, eventually become a decent person ? Kallina thought Max was likely to revert to bad Max during their trip to Norway, assuming he agreed to go with them. They'd need to find another prison for him, she was sure of it, or a decent place for his grave.

"Kallina, welcome to our home." Said Monique. "You should have all let us know you were coming, but we can provide a better meal than tinned beans."

"Oh, the warm tinned corn beef was the worst." Said Max.

There was laughter, even from those who couldn't have understood the reference to the time when Kallina had been Max's jailer. Max, Monique and her husband, Lionel, had gone into the sealed off part of the ruins. Max had killed Lionel, but Monique had helped him cut up the body. They'd used the sharpened edges of tins, before dumping the pieces into a hole in the ground they used as a toilet. A deep hole, it led into a cave system far below. Kallina had still smelt the dreadful aroma of death, as soon as she'd entered their prison. They were the couple who'd adopted two small children. Kallina let Ruby lead her to the chair of honour, at the head of their table.

"Food first, then we'll talk." Said Max.

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Eugenie angled her gun hand, so that the weapon was hidden behind her. She'd learned by experience, that simply seeing someone in a mask, didn't cause people to panic. Despite the feeling that the entire population of the world was paranoid, people tended to assume the best. Masks usually meant parties, Halloween, maybe a horror film being publicised. Seeing a gun tended to turn the crowd into a chaotic, frightened mob. All of them trying to get out of the same door. Yes, she wanted them out of the building, but not as a mindless mob, crushing each other and stomping over anyone who fell over. Plus, though she knew it was unlikely. They might run into the couple who ran Gallaan Industries.

"Stay behind me Flex." She said. "I'm not bullet proof, not exactly. I am tough though; it would take a lot to kill me."

No need to tell him twice, he seemed very willing to use her as cover. The police were unlikely to arrive in a hurry, but Gallaan were just the sort of corporate conglomerate to have a few armed guards somewhere in the building. Mercenaries probably, like the guys in Belgium armed with AR15s. The elevator was in its own room, most of the penthouse consisted of a separate area, which looked like a rooftop villa.

"The pool first, yell if you recognise anyone." She said.

"I only ever saw them in business clothes."

"Are you going to recognise them ? We could go straight to setting the place alight."

"I'll know them, I'm sure I will."

The pool was one of those that looked like it went over the edge of the building, the blue of the water merging into the blue of the horizon. Very clever, Eugenie enjoyed the view while Flex looked over the swimmer and those lying on loungers. None of the people seemed at all phased by having two young people in hockey masks, show up out of nowhere.

"Nah, they're not here." Said Flex.

"We'll try the villa."

"The what ?"

"Never mind, follow me."

To her it looked like a Mediterranean villa, dropped onto a shiny glass office block. It even had two floors and covered a good two thirds of the roof space. It had to happen of course; her right buttock could only hide the gun for so long. There was a scream of they have a gun, or something like that. Pandemonium set in, as everyone at the pool, headed for the elevator. Eugenie cursed herself for not keeping the plan simple. Spider was the master of keeping things simple. He'd have set light to a few waste bins and waited for the building to empty. After that he'd have gone into full on vandal mode. Take out their computer system with a sledge hammer and you might not stop Gallaan, but you'd slow them down to a crawl for a while. But no, she had to try and make it complicated.

"Did you see armed guards when you were here ?" She asked.

"No, but that doesn't mean there aren't any."

The wind picked up as they approached the villa on the roof. A woman going through the door, tilted her head a little to avoid the gusts. To Eugenie, she was just another face among many, but Flex knew her.

"That's her, Eugie.....It's her, the one we're after."

Eugenie had a thing about her name being shortened, though she'd leave muttering to him about it for another time. The woman might have noticed them, or it might have been routine. When they reached the door, it was firmly locked. Not that the door worried her, but opening it was likely to be noisy.

“See that statue ? Get it between you and the door.”

“No problem.”

Eugenie hadn't destroyed anything, but she had made all the grass in a Paris park go a weird shade of yellow. One or two trees wouldn't do well that year, though that was it. She'd stored their life force inside herself, for just such a moment. The door looked solid, a last resort kind of door. A door designed to keep any passing barbarian horde from getting into the real heart of the building. Flex noticed her hesitating.

“Can you open it ?” He asked.

“Yes, by brute force. It'll be huge and drain most of my energy. Still, we've come this far.”

The shouting told her some new arrivals were at the elevator. No assault rifles, but the three men in white shirts with name badges, were all carrying handguns.

“Flex, here.....Catch. Keep them busy, I'll need to concentrate.”

She threw him her gun and much to her relief, he didn't drop it. Eugenie stood in front of the door and didn't move as the first shot was fired. They must have missed her; she wasn't dead or in pain. Flex fired back and she thought she might have five or ten minutes, before the guys with AR15s arrived.

“How many bullets does this hold ?” Asked Flex.

“Fourteen... Now be quiet.”

Palms flat on the door and a little of her energy used to shield her from the worst of what she was about to unleash. Ruby had once worked out how much energy could be pulled from ten square metres of a grass field. Eugenie couldn't remember the numbers, but it was huge. Add on the trees, the worms in the soil under the grass and innumerable other bugs. As she released the energy, she held nothing back, it had to work first time. Her palms stung, as all those megajoules of energy, slammed into the door. A few splinters scratched her cheeks, but the shield she'd created held, mostly. The door vanished, to become pieces of door inside the entrance hall.

“Guys with bigger guns are here.” Said Flex.

“Come on, lets find that woman you saw.”

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