

Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

Chapter 9 – Backup Drive

“It wasn’t that Luca couldn’t sleep, she wanted to enjoy the night. Born in Kraków, Poland; where winter temperatures could be brutal. The night air was so warm, it seemed to reach all of her, right down to her bones.”

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The way Max had said food first and talk later, had made it sound as though he intended to hold some kind of formal briefing. It hadn’t been like that, though his adopted children had been sent to bed and his small army of servants had been cleared from the room. It was a hot evening in Mogadishu, it had to still be about thirty degrees, about eighty-five in old money, as Max referred to it. Max was an American of course, a nation who’d clung to imperial measures, despite fighting to be free of the empire.

The housekeeper had left several bottles of spirits and a trayful of glasses. With a cool breeze coming through the window, Charlotte felt comfortable. She particularly liked the constant zap of the bug lamps, as they dealt with unwanted flying insects. The sounds, the smells, there was even a slowly revolving ceiling fan. It all took her back to long hot nights in Kenya. Charlie began to see why Max was happy to live a quiet life in Somalia. Take away the squalor beyond his walls and the compound was a little piece of heaven. Ruby and George had even given him a reasonable stipend, to cover expenses. Yes, she could understand why he’d adopted a couple of kids and put down some roots. They were all currently drinking their favourite after dinner drinks and lounging on sofas. “Can I have my curiosity satisfied about the newcomers ?” Asked Max. “I realised there was the chance of others. Are they both gifted in some way ?”

“Abshir has promise, he’s been trying to delve into my mind all day.” Said Charlie.

“It might not be your mind he’s after.” Said Sarah.

Drink did that, it dealt with inhibitions better than a year of therapy. Drink didn’t make people incautious, it made them honest. At least that was the way Charlie looked at it. There was a little laughter and Abshir blushed, just a little.

“I am completely ordinary.” Said Calaso. “I’m his half-sister, born of a different mother.”

“Muggles, Calaso.” Said Spider. “They call us muggles, though we have our uses.”

“Your erm.....Unorthodox talents, make you special, Spider.” Said Sophie. “I’m sure Calaso will become indispensable in some way, once we’re travelling north.”

“So, you’re going north....Where to ?” Asked Monique.

“Norway, I sense the rogue hybrids are there.” Said Kallina.

“I was hoping Max would join us and bring a few of his people with him.” Said Ruby. “After all, I have been paying him for nearly a year. Then there are the energy weapons that must still be in their packing crates.”

“Time to earn that money.” Added Charlotte.

“It hasn’t been all barbecues and bubbly.” Said Monique. “Bandits tried a full scale attack a few months ago. Luckily our walls are high and our guards are well trained.”

"It's alright, Monique, Ruby is right." Said Max. "There is the occasional problem with local gangs, but I've no intention of taking everyone with me. You'll have enough guards to keep you safe. I will be going with Ruby though; I owe her that."

Monique didn't just glare at Max, she got up on her feet and pointed a fist at him.

"No, you promised me when we were in that dreadful jail in the Yemen." She shouted. "You said we'd always be together, that you'd never abandon me."

"I'm not abandoning you; I'd never do that." Said Max. "A few weeks, maybe a little longer. I'll soon be back and our lives will get back to normal."

"Unless you die." Said Monique. "I'm going with you Max. Where you go, I go. I'm sure there'll be somewhere to leave the boys, somewhere safe. Maybe Ruby could help with that?"

"I could help with that." Said Todd. "I know people, good people. They could arrange for someone to look after the boys. They've done that kind of thing before."

Poor Max, he obviously didn't want to take Monique into dangerous places, but he'd chosen a tough lady to share his life with. Then again, most people would consider Mogadishu as one of the most dangerous places on the planet.

"Good, then it seems I'm going with you to Norway." Said Monique.

"Bring her, Max." Said Spider. "She scares me, so she should terrify our enemies."

Laughter, genuine unforced laughter. More drink, interspersed with discussions on how to get to Norway, without undoing all the good work of getting across Kenya without being seen. Charlotte closed her eyes and fell asleep, just as Ruby and Max began to argue about the best air cargo company serving Scandinavia.

"Oh, more buckets with lids." Charlotte mumbled.

Norway seemed an odd choice for the Rogue's new base. Ishel had told everyone how much she despised cold weather.

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The main outside door was gone, turned to broken wood and twisted metal. No way of blocking the entrance, at least not quickly. A short hallway with other strong looking doors leading off it, all of them locked. Eugenie was leaning against one door, her cheek against it, as a burst of automatic fire hit the ceiling.

"I don't like to pester you, but we should decide on a door, before we're killed." Said Flex.

"No point in going the wrong way." She replied. "Though....Maybe I should discourage them a little."

Another burst of fire from the men, creeping towards the door. Her cover to one side of the door was better than theirs. Tempting to do something massive to them, but a lot of innocent office workers were in the building. Eugenie concentrated on the statue Flex had been hiding behind. A modern piece of art, made to look like an ancient statue of a woman. Dreadful art, but it was large and best of all, heavy.

"I'm not really that into art, but I know what I like." She said.

She lifted the statue into the air, before putting enough energy into it, to cause it to explode into hundreds of tiny chunks. The statue became a shrapnel weapon, which tore through everything in its path. Partition walls, plants in pot, desk, chairs....And any guards too slow to find something solid to hide behind. Eugenie felt for human heart beats where the men with guns had been and found only two and they were weak.

"They'll send more men, there are always more guards." She said.

"Choose a door Eugie, for fuck's sake choose a door." Yelled Flex.

"I need to make sure we choose the door that leads us to that woman. Oh, and call me Eugie again and I will hurt you."

Her gifts weren't an exact science, there were too many people behind each door to be certain. As her powers grew with time and experience, it became easier, but looking through walls was never going to like looking across an open space. She felt each door again and, in the end, it was choose one, or fight their way out of the building, or at least try to.

"You were right, there are more guards." Shouted Flex. "One seems to have a rocket launcher." In the end, the door in front of her felt right, it was as unscientific as that. Ruby was always telling her to trust her instincts, so she was trusting them.

"Come here Flex, we're leaving.....Through this door." She said.

Destroying it would make it easy for the guards. Just an ordinary lock, she used a simple trick on it, one Kallina had taught her. A woman in business clothes was behind the door. Not the woman they were looking for, so Eugenie ignored her and almost pulled Flex into the room. The lock trick again once the door was closed, though this time she jammed the lock.

"It won't stop them for long." She said.

When she turned, the woman was going through one of the two exits from the room. Eugenie had another feeling, an instinct. She followed the woman and for once, the door wasn't locked. Again, for someone who'd been moaning at her to hurry up, Flex had to be pulled through the door.

"Come on." She said.

"I've a thing about rushing into places I'm not sure about."

The door was quite solid, so she used the trick again, to jam the lock. They didn't have all day; a rocket launcher was effectively a universal lockpick. They were in a hallway with just one other possible exit. Of course, Flex now had to be held back.

"Not so fast, there's another way to go." She said.

She could see the doorway, even if he couldn't. Her sight was better than his, it was better than most who were completely human. There were marks, where many hands had pressed. There were tiny pieces of dirt, where many fingers had pulled. Not easy to see, but she'd noticed all the giveaway signs.

"Where?" Asked Flex.

"Watch.....And learn."

Eugenie pushed in a certain spot on a corner wall, before pulling to one side. There was an audible click as a doorway opened. No hallways, the door gave access to spiral staircase, leading up.

"How did you.....Never mind." Said Flex. "Explain it latter, when no guards with assault rifles are chasing us."

"Stay behind me, my warning senses are tingling a little." She said.

"No problem, anything you say, Eugenie."

There was enough space to close the door behind them, though there wasn't a lock to jam. Eugenie didn't have much stored power left. She used some of it to warp the door a little, which would have to do. With luck, the stairs might be a secret from everyone who wasn't worthy of the top floor, even the guards. As she went up the stairs, her sense that something dangerous was waiting, grew.

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It wasn't that Luca couldn't sleep, she wanted to enjoy the night. Born in Kraków, Poland; where winter temperatures could be brutal. The night air was so warm, it seemed to reach all of her, right down to her bones. She'd heard Sarah say it was too hot, like sitting in front of a fan heater. To Luca, the night time temperature was just about perfect. Then there were the stars too, you could see the

entire night sky in Afgoye. No ambient light from big cities, no smog. Luca could see the milky way above her. It was all....Wonderful.

"Where is she off to ?" She mumbled.

Luca was sat on the steps of the house Max used for visitors. No one had said they had to stay in the compound at night, though they all knew Somalia wasn't exactly the safest place in the world. There was Anna, walking towards the rear gate, dressed in dark clothing. She was even wearing a hoody to hide her head and particularly, her face. Anna had a walk though, a very distinctive way of walking. Luca couldn't resist, she ran after her.

"Where are you going ?" She asked. "Are we allowed out at night ?"

"It's not a prison, Luca. We can come and go as we please."

"So, where are you going ?"

No reading Anna's expression, she couldn't even see her face under the hood. Had she stumbled on her going out on a mission for Ruby ? All she had to do was tell her to clear off, and Luca would have left her alone. It was the middle of the night though and Luca was a little bored and quite curious.

"Just out for a walk around Afgoye." Said Anna. "I need to get out of the compound for a while and nowhere is ever as bad as its painted. I'll be careful, so there's no need to go running to Ruby."

"I had no intention of running to anyone. Take me with you, please."

"Alright, but you'll need something to cover your head." Said Anna.

"I have a hoody in my bag. I'll get it, but don't vanish on me when I go to get it."

"I'll still be here when you get back."

Anna kept her promise and she'd obviously prepared the ground a little. The guards at the rear gate talked to her as if it had all been arranged. A warning about not heading north at night and they were outside, away from the protection of high walls and razor wire. There was a hundred yards or so with nothing but barren ground, before what looked like a wooded area.

"Why no going north ?" Asked Luca.

"Everything grows wild that way, lots of trees and undergrowth. No one walks through such areas at night." Said Anna. "Not so bad during the day, or so I was told."

Luca was quite happy to follow Anna, as she headed sort of east. There were a few buildings, which they avoided and a drainage ditch or two. No people though, not a single person to avoid. By the time they came to the track and obvious signs of farming going on, Luca was enjoying her night time tour of Afgoye.

"Did you bring a gun." Asked Anna.

"No....No, of course not. Did you ?"

"Yes, but only to be used as a last resort. I've no wish to hurt anyone, unless they seem likely to hurt us. I suppose there is some danger out here, but we should be alright. I had to get out of that place for a while. It feels like a prison."

"Not to me, I like it." Said Luca.

"Yes, but I doubt if you've been kept in a prisoner anywhere. I was, for years and they tortured me a few times. I'd probably still be there, or dead, if Ruby hadn't rescued me."

If it hadn't been for worrying about potentially unfriendly locals, the walk would have been idyllic.

They saw one man going into a house, but he never saw them. Eventually they found a structure designed to store a crop of some kind. It looked like a makeshift store for turnips, though Luca had no idea if turnips grew in that part of Africa. They managed to scramble onto the roof, without making the turnip store collapse. It did wobble a little, as they lay on the roof, looking up at the sky.

"You're right, this is better than being in the compound." Said Luca.

“The main memory I have of Africa, is about the people Ruby is descended from, in a way. They visited a huge number of planets in the milky way. Not all, but they knew what they were doing. They selected the suns and planets most likely to have intelligent creatures on them. All those stars up there, many with planets capable of supporting life. They found life, lots of it, most of it barely more advanced than the sort of things you’d find wriggling about in a pond. No intelligent life out there though, none at all.”

“I didn’t realise that.” Said Luca. “Ruby has never mentioned it.”

“Ask her, she’ll tell you about it. Then, when they began to look in other galaxies, they found something truly evil. An intelligent lifeform that looked like a rock. It wanted to destroy all life on Earth. The only intelligent life they ever found and it wanted to kill us all.”

“That’s dreadful, Anna.”

“To me, it says we should be grateful for what we have and stay where we are.”

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Eugenie felt agitation when she reached the top of the spiral staircase. It was her again, the woman she’d scared in the first room. No words, Eugenie was just picking up fear and agitation. The man the woman was talking to, probably a guard, was becoming agitated too. She put her finger to her lips, the universal symbol that meant keep quiet. Flex just nodded, twice. Finally, they were obviously close enough to the door, for their words to make sense.

“They were right behind me.” Said the woman.

“The door downstairs isn’t easy to find.” A man’s voice.

“Make sure, that’s what you’re fucking paid to do.”

Obviously, the woman hadn’t been on any sensitivity in management courses, or at least not recently. Eugenie didn’t have that much energy left, so she hit the guard as the door in front of her opened. All the wunderkinds were far stronger than the average human. There were times when a fist to the face, was the easiest and best solution. The guard was down, unconscious with a bloody, broken nose. Flex still had her gun and by the time Eugenie had picked up the guard’s Glock, the woman had left. Once again, she’d locked the door from the other side.

“I’m really getting to hate her.” She said.

“Let me take care of this door.” Said Flex. “It is my turn.”

Just a standard office door, with a cheap lock. Still, it would need a little skill to pick. When flex moved back, she knew he was going to use brute force on the door. Eugenie had received training in such things, she knew TV and films always did it wrong. Anyone and everyone shoulder barged doors they wanted to open. How many people over the years, had ended up in emergency with dislocated shoulders, from doing it like the A Team did it ? Serge had been in the French special forces, he knew how to get past a door and it seemed, Flex knew the right way too. Rock backwards and then use the sole of your boot on the door. Get your heel just above the lock if you can. As the door flew open, Flex gave a little bow.

“You’ve done that before.” She said.

“My uncle taught me.”

“Was he in the army ?”

“No, he was in a gang.”

There wasn’t much to the top floor of what Eugenie thought of as a villa, constructed on top of the Gallan building. One wall was all glass, with a view of Paris that must have doubled the rent. The room was very luxuriously furnished, probably the holy of holies for the top executives. There were a few people in expensive suits, exiting through other doors, as quickly as they could. The woman

they'd begun to hate was running too. It looked like after following her around for so long, they'd never even get to know her name. The woman who ran the place, the one Flex knew; she wasn't running. She had a gun and if she'd fired immediately, things could have gone very differently. She'd hesitated, most civilised people did. Two steps and Eugenie was close enough.

"You don't want to hurt me." Said Eugenie.

The hesitation in the woman's mind grew and Eugenie kept moving closer. Luckily the mental projection part of her mind didn't use up power, the way the more physical parts of her gift, tended to do. Eugenie broadcast empathy, love and trust. It always worked if she could get close enough, always.

"I'm Eugenie, who are you?"

No one can hide their own name; it was almost a universal rule. The woman now trusted her anyway, there was no hesitation.

"I'm Donna....Donatella Lavigne."

The name was actually a lie, a fake name used so often that the woman now thought of it as her own. It was like being able to read subtext. Looking into her mind, Eugenie picked up that Donna and her husband were indeed, the head people of the Gallaan Group. It seemed Donna thought they were there as industrial spies, there had been a lot of rumours about someone planning to raid their offices.

"We're not corporate spies." Said Eugenie. "Where is your husband?"

"He's in London all week."

Damn, giving Donna a temporary lobotomy would have to do. It might be enough, to get the Gallaan hard men to leave them alone for a while. Eugenie still hadn't completely given up on the idea of trashing their offices. There had to be a main computer system hidden somewhere.

"What would you do for me Donna?"

"Anything....Everything."

"Where is the main computer system?"

"It's in Frankfurt."

Shit, things kept getting worse. Even Flex was giving her a look that said they'd arrived half cocked, with crappy intelligence. Computer system was acting like a trigger phrase. Donna was agitated again, that the backup drive might be at risk. Actually she was right, now she'd mentally given Eugenie the idea.

"Where is the backup drive?"

"In the safe."

Their new friend was pointing at a painting on the wall, probably an original of some kind that was worth a small fortune. Not that Eugenie had ever considered using her gifts for criminal activities. It had crossed her mind though, that if she did, she'd be very successful at it. Flex pulled at the painting, which moved to one side. A safe behind the painting. Nothing fancy, no old school dial that had to be moved left and right until it reached the right numbers. Just a simple number keypad.

"What is the code?" Asked Eugenie.

"Five eight, seven four.....Eight, nine, one five."

Flex came back with the backup drive, which wasn't that impressive.

"This was all that was in there." He said.

A cheap USB backup drive, the sort people with home computers used to hold copies of movies and vast numbers of Jpeg files. Two terabytes according to the thoughts in Donna's head, just about every sensitive piece of information Gallaan possessed. Why the crappy backup device? They could

do it themselves, without their IT people knowing. Paranoid people at the top, wary of the paranoid people they hired. The backup drive was insurance, in case the Gallaan empire came tumbling down. "That's it, find something to keep it in, Flex." She said. "Something tough, it's quite fragile." While he looked, Eugenie did what needed to be done to Donna. It was better to do it alone. Flex was already clever enough, without watching any of her usual techniques. She used the same technique as Ruby had used, right from the time when she'd realised her mental gifts had a broadcast mode.

"What is your earliest memory, Donna?"

It didn't take that long, pulling out memories before talking Donna through alterations. Confusion was the name of the game, making every memory feel a little unreal. Like building a city on sand, that was constantly shifting. Donna was from a nasty business and she was probably one the nastiest people in that business. Eugenie felt guilty for hurting her, but the human brain is amazing. People recovered from terrible injuries. Her brain would reorder events, none of the altered memories had been planted that deep, or cross referenced. A few months and Donna would be back to her old nasty self. Flex came back with a leather briefcase, just in time to see Donna looking like a high functioning zombie.

"Wow, you did a number on her." He said.

"I'm not proud of doing it to her. It just.....It had to be done."

"So, all we need to do now is get out of a building full of armed guards."

"I already had a plan for that." Said Eugenie.

It didn't take much power to aim something little above a spark, at a fire and smoke detector in the false ceiling. Eugenie would have set light to a few rubbish bins, but the alarms began to wail. The sprinklers were unexpected, she'd thought they'd require at least two sensors going off in different rooms, But no, the sprinklers were doing their best to soak everything. She couldn't help grinning at Flex, as he became drenched from head to foot.

"I think we can leave now." She said.

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Todd had heard about it from Sophie. Not that he thought Caleb was particularly helpful, but then again, he hadn't known him before Kallina had overlayed his character flaws with a few spells. Sophie claimed he was different and as he respected her opinion, he was willing to accept that Caleb was a new man.

"Wow, that was impressive." Said Caleb. "A lot better than the last attempt."

A few of them were watching Abshir Duale being trained by Kallina and Charlotte, though Sophie was throwing in the occasional comment. It seemed the new member of the wunderkinds had real potential. He just lacked experience, mainly because he'd never had a mentor to train him. One thing everyone had agreed on, was that Abshir was far too long a name for everyday use. He'd hated the shortening to Abs and finally, after a few heated arguments, he quite liked Abe. So Abe it was, even Calaso had thought it sounded good and suited her brother. As for Calaso....Most still called her by her full name, though a few used Cal. The girl herself, seemed happy to be referred to be either name.

"I don't understand it." Said Sophie. "He can lift a large rock off the ground with his mind, yet he's unable to shatter it. Both actions use the same gifts. If he can do one, he should be able to do the other."

"I could never get any of this right, a few days ago." Said Abe.

He was happy, with a constant grin on his face. Todd had no super skills, but he understood how Abe had to be feeling. Most of his life spent with brief surges of power he couldn't control, then pow. Along comes Kallina and tells him that was all nothing, try this. Like driving a mini metro, until someone gives you Ferrari.

"I still think we should develop his skills with fire." Said Charlotte.

"You think everything is about flames and burning." Said Sophie.

Ruby wasn't with them; she was in yet another planning meeting with Max and his people. She had helped though, by insisting Max gave them a place where Abe's skills could be assessed, trained and developed. They needed to see what the new guy could do, simple as that. Max had given them a spot near the wall, fairly well hidden by a building used to store dried foods. There was no problem with Max's team, they were used to the unusual. The locals though, they were ordinary farmers with all the usual superstitions and beliefs in the spirit world. One look at the wunderkinds levitating rocks and they might worship them, or decide to kill them all. Either option was considered far from ideal, so they trained Abe in a private area of the compound.

"I have tried, but apart from a tiny spark, I'm useless at producing fire." Said Abe.

"There was that time when you nearly burned down the house." Said Cal. "We told dad you knocked a lamp over by accident."

"That was the night I had an awful nightmare." Said Abe.

"I've had nightmare power surges." Said Charlie. "If only nightmares could be summoned while we're awake."

Kallina was laughing, a long laugh that went on and on. Todd wondered if she was having after effects from her terrible injuries. Eventually, when everyone was beginning to feel awkward about the laughter, she spoke.

"Surely you must have all heard how Kurt triggered Ruby's gifts to become fully active?"

"Oh, that story about love's first kiss, how could we forget that." Said Sophie.

"You're very cynical about love, Sophie." Said Cal.

"Sophie is cynical about everything." Said Todd. "That's part of her charm. I've heard that story many times, told to me by Ruby herself. It wasn't the kiss it was all about the emotions. Kurt kicked started her powers by using her own emotions."

Kallina was actually applauding him.

"Yes.....Yes, Todd." Said Kallina. "Kurt didn't awaken Ruby with a kiss, though the idea is wonderfully poetic. He woke her up by zapping her with the emotional response to the kiss, his closeness and the situation. She had just been in a collision with the car I was driving. Yes, I was there too, though that often gets forgotten. I think we can do without a driving accident, but I'm offering to zap Abe with a kiss, if he doesn't mind?"

Todd had seen Kallina as Baba Yaga, so many times. He'd begun to think of her as an incredibly ancient witch. As he looked at her it crossed his mind that kissing her wouldn't be a chore. As Kallina she looked like a beautiful blonde woman, no older than her mid-twenties. Todd might have found it hard to get past memories of Baba Yaga, but Abe had never seen her as the old witch of the woods.

"I don't mind if you want to kiss me." He said.

"Not just a kiss, she'll zap you." Said Charlie.

"I don't mind, do that too." Said Abe.

"You seem to have a fan, Kallina." Said Caleb.

It could have been cold and clinical, but Kallina obviously wanted a certain amount of passion to be involved, good old-fashioned lust. She kissed Abe's cheeks, before moving to his neck. By the time

she reached his lips, they were both going for it, eating face as Sophie called it. There came a point when Todd felt awkward watching, what was becoming far too hot for anything public. Kallina touched Abe and he touched her, in some very intimate places. As Todd averted his gaze, he made eye contact with Charlie, who simply shrugged at him. It was important, no one was going to tell them to stop being quite so publicly affectionate. When it ended, Abe actually sighed.

“You have power deep inside you, Abe.” Said Kallina. “A lot of power, I felt it.”

Todd expected Sophie to comment on it not being the only thing she’d felt, but they were all eager to see the results of Kallina emotionally zapping the new guy. There had to be a result from all that, there had to be.

“Alright, look at the rock which you couldn’t destroy.” Said Kallina. “Imagine it getting hot Abe, hotter than the sun, hotter than you dare. You can do it, you really can.”

“Burn the rock.” Said Charlie.

“Rocks don’t burn.” Said Caleb.

“Anything burns if you get it hot enough.” Said Charlie.

Abe looked at the rock and it rose about two feet off the ground, but it didn’t get hot. It didn’t do anything, other than hang in the air.

“Point at it with both hands.” Said Kallina. “Use your hands to focus the power.....See the heat, become the heat.....Send the heat to the rock.”

“You can do it.” Shouted Sophie.

It began slowly and grew to white heat and then beyond. Todd knew there was a point of absolute zero, but was there a maximum heat ? The rock glowed and gave off so much heat, that they all drew back, apart from Abe.

“Careful Abe.” Said Charlie.

“I’ll shield him from the heat.” Said Sophie.

On and on it went, until the sand below the rock began to melt. The ground for a few feet in either direction, became an incredibly hot, viscous fluid.

“Maybe he’s gone too far.” Said Caleb.

“Leave him be, let things run their course.” Said Kallina. “He’s been collecting power here and there since he was child, completely unaware of doing it. Let him drain most of it and I can show him how to renew his supply, without killing anyone.”

By the time Abe gave up, the rock was a heap of incredibly hot floating dust. As he stopped using his gift, the dust dropped to the ground. Everything was so hot, Abe seemed to have increased the air temperature over quite an area.

“I don’t quite believe I did that.” Said Abe.

“Kallina must be a hell of a kisser.” Said Caleb.

“You must let me train him.” Said Charlie. “I can develop his skills unlike anyone else.”

“No, it’s too soon for him to decide on a gift to concentrate on.” Said Kallina. “Plus, he needs to rest for the rest of the day. Tomorrow we’ll see how well he does at crushing something that isn’t usually crushable.”

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For all they knew, the backup drive might have had counter measures installed. At the very least it might have called home when it was powered up, by grabbing onto a WiFi connection. Eugenie had heard of computer drives that burst into flames if they were fiddled with. Donatella Lavigne would have probably known, if she’d had the sense to have asked her. It was that thing about hindsight though, it was always twenty-twenty vision. There had been a lot going on, though leaving the

Gallaan building had been easy. With so many wet and scared office workers running from the building, no one had bothered them.

“Just a plain ordinary USB drive, as far as I can see.” Said Josh.

Villand had given them a number to call and they’d been invited to the shop where Josh repaired computers and sold games consoles.

“I trust him, so you can trust him.” Villand had said.

He seemed to have no worries about having the stolen backup drive on the premises. According to Villand the man prodding at the drive, was the best computer nerd in Paris.

“I have a standalone system for testing things that might be infected.” Said Josh. “I suggest we power it up and see what’s on it. I have to say that it’s likely to be encrypted.”

“The person we got it from seemed a bit of a technophobe.” Said Flex.

“Yeah, I doubt if they knew what encrypted meant.” Added Eugenie.

Eugenie meant it, but she was still glad they’d brought the drive to Josh, rather than powering it up back at the hotel. There had been nothing on the online news media about anything nasty happening at the Gallaan building. Just a few lines about a minor fire and that had been tucked away in the local news, alongside a piece about a puppy born with green fur. It looked as though Gallaan wanted to keep the whole thing quiet. Even so, if the drive did call home, Eugenie preferred the Gallaan thugs turning up at Josh’s shop. Not that Josh inspired confidence. It took him several minutes to find a spare USB cable.

“Alright.... Stand back a little.” Said Josh.

They stood back about three feet and of course, Josh began laughing at them.

“Sorry, couldn’t resist guys. I’ve never had one explode, ever.” Said Josh.

According to Villand. Josh had been born in South Africa, though both his parents had been French. Josh had excellent spoken English, though his accent sounded a little strange. He also seemed to have an over developed sense of humour. Josh connected up the drive to a generic power supply, pressed the USB cable in nice and tight....Before turning on the rather old looking computer he used as a potentially sacrificial test machine.

“Well....it booted cleanly.” Said Josh.

Josh fiddled with the keyboard, while they watched.

“No encryption, whoever took this copy was a real novice.”

“Yes, we expected that to be the case.” Said Flex.

“Did you bring a laptop ?”

No one had mentioned laptops, was she supposed to have known one was needed ?

“No, we didn’t.” She said.

“You need one for the data. Then I’ll zap this drive in my degausser, you can watch me do it. Once it’s wiped it’ll go in a dumpster a few streets away. But, you will need a laptop. I can sell you one.....Do you have any preference for manufacturer and model ?”

He must have had quite a few backup drives in stock, but Eugenie understood. Ruby would pay Villand, who would look after Josh. In the meantime, selling computers was how Josh made a living. Everyone needed to earn a crust, it was how the system worked. She had an Amex card in the zipped off part of her bag, which she handed to Josh.

“I’ll happily buy whichever laptop you recommend.” She said.

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