

Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

Chapter 19 – The Sting

“Ruby delved into Monique’s mind and found a woman who’d been separated from her children, only to see her husband being beaten by Baba Yaga. Her mind had gone to hide for a while, which wasn’t surprising.”

Δ

“Nice of you to come and see us.” Said Malou. “I had no idea the British security services had the budget for a trip to Paris. I’ll gladly rip up the hotel bill, if that helps ?”

“Oh, our budget wouldn’t cover the hire of a pedalo on Brighton beach.” Said Ronald Kelly. “There are advantages to Foxy have a watching brief over the other services. I believe my trip is coming out of the Foreign Office budget, as a cultural exchange project. Don’t rip up the bill, the FO can afford it.”

Ronald had arrived quite late the previous evening, with a request to see them both over breakfast. There had been the usual pleasantries and politeness. Only if a breakfast meeting was convenient, but George Polandrous knew an official summons when he heard one.

“Penny did tell me not to hire any more investigators.” Said George. “I had a call from Foxy too, with a definite whiff of an or else about it. If that’s why you’re here ? I give you my word, I did get the message.”

Breakfast in Malou’s office, rather than the dining room. Ronald had asked for a meeting where there was no chance of anything being overheard. George felt glad that people who upset the security services, were no longer locked up in the Tower of London.

“Things have changed.” Said Ronald. “I’m here to see a few people, including Gérard Villand. I will be talking to Penny in a few days, so please don’t tell her I’ve seen you both. She might take that as going over her head, which isn’t intended. Foxy had a call from.....Someone very important and near the top in government. It seems the Americans are happy to buy weapons from Gallaan Industries and want us to stop annoying them. We can’t be certain, but it looks like the CIA are invoking the special relationship. Something they only remember when it suits them.”

“But Gallaan have killed people.” Said Malou.

“And two of Ruby’s team raided their office in Paris and killed several of Gallaan’s security personnel.” Said Ronald. “I’m on your side, Malou. But if you look at it from the point of view of the Americans.....”

“So, are you ordering Ruby to cease and desist her plans ?” Asked George.

There was something about the way Ronald grinned at him, which made him sure Ruby would get no such order.

“My orders are to tell Villand to behave, or he may lose the protection he’s been enjoying. In return, Gallaan have agreed to cease hostilities in France. Penny, I’ll be seeing soon and there are a few others.....But that is their business. As for Ruby.....”

“Oh, that poor girl, she’s been through so much.” Said Malou.

“And I’ve no intention of adding to her problems.” Said Ronald. “She’s travelling in a Ukrainian made aircraft, owned by a Nigerian air cargo company. So, she’s nothing to do with the UK government. There’s Todd of course, a serving member of the British armed forces. We can always say he went

rogue. Ruby and her wunderkinds aren't anything to do with us. Though unofficially, Foxy will carry on smoothing her path in any way he can."

"Won't that piss off the Americans?" Asked George.

"Maybe, actually I almost hope it does. Olga has a plan of her own. She had to ask Foxy for help with a matter in Italy. If that works, Gallan are going to be too busy to bother Ruby. I'm sure you both must remember Olga?"

"Yes, of course I do." Said George. "What is she planning?"

"A sting George, a huge sting. I can't tell you any more than that."

Ronald told them a lot more, or more accurately he talked a lot. George began to realise than Ronald was capable of being downright garrulous, without actually giving anything away. After lunch, Ronald went to see Villand, at an agreed location.

"Do you think they'll put a bag over his head?" Asked Malou.

"I hope so and put him in the back of a van." Said George. "Ronald is getting a bit too smug for my liking. Can't tell us about the sting.....The cheek of it."

~

~

Ruby hadn't been in a good mood and matters at the hotel hadn't improved her state of mind. Abe had proven himself under fire, which was great. Cal had wandered off with two strange boys, but Ruby remembered doing much the same kind of thing while at school. She'd been lucky, with just a very angry father to face. It was natural, it was hormones, it was part of the fun of growing up. It wasn't something where two boys should end up dead, their bodies dumped in a car park. Cal could be left with Luca, who'd already mentioned sedation to help the girl sleep. That didn't resolve the matter entirely, but it gave Ruby time to deal with the next crisis.

"I don't think Kallina will kill Max." Said Todd. "It's just that even for her, she's not behaving rationally."

"Irrational is her natural state. How is Max, is he alright?" She asked.

"Still unconscious when I last looked." Said Todd. "Kallina had bounced his head off the floor for a while, before I arrived."

The room shared by Max and Monique was a small suite, with its own lounge area. Ruby could feel Kallina, before she saw her. Her emotions almost lit up the room. Kallina was sat looking at Max, the way a cat watches a mouse. Monique seemed to be asleep, which given the circumstances, seemed a little strange. Ruby nodded at the two marauders who were standing guard, before going to look at Monique.

"How long has she been like this?"

"No idea, she was asleep when we arrived." Said a marauder.

Ruby delved into Monique's mind and found a woman who'd been separated from her children, only to see her husband being beaten by Baba Yaga. Her mind had gone to hide for a while, which wasn't surprising.

"It's far from being a natural sleep, but it's what she needs, for now." Said Ruby.

Max next, after deliberately ignoring Kallina. Trouble in the hotel was unforgiveable, even for such an old friend. Ruby looked into Max's mind and found none of the fragmented memories that were an indicator of brain damage. Nothing in his mind about arranging for Cal to be abducted, but he'd need to be awake to be interrogated properly. Not that Ruby thought he was guilty. Kallina wasn't handling things as well as she once had. Ruby didn't like to think about someone with so much power, becoming paranoid. Overly anxious was an easier prognosis to handle.

"I don't think you've done any permanent damage, Kallina." Said Ruby. "When he wakes up, we'll both talk to him. A few seed words and we'll know for certain. I have to say that you seem to have over reacted."

"It's always him....You know that, Ruby. Max has always wanted to kill all my children."

Despite being angry, Ruby hugged Kallina. Her children, she'd always think of the wunderkinds as her children, even if they were hundreds of years old.

"There's Rocky." Said Todd. "I assumed you'd want to talk to him."

"Ahh yes, Rocky." Said Ruby. "Odd name for a local, I'm guessing his parents are fans of the movie. He may be able to tell us whether Max is guilty. Come on Kallina, we'll see him together."

Kallina was back to being a cat watching for mouse to move. The way she was looking at Max, didn't say much for his chances of seeing another birthday.

"Come on Kallina." Said Ruby. "Do you want to know the truth, or do we just kill Max because you don't like him?"

"He'll try to escape and she'll help him."

"Monique will be asleep for hours." Said Ruby. "And I'm sure McGill's people are capable of guarding Max."

"I'll drive, the house is near the shooting range we used." Said Todd.

Kallina didn't look keen on leaving, when she realised it meant leaving the hotel. Ruby was determined though and eventually; they were in the car and heading away from the centre of Baku.

"Is it far?" Asked Kallina.

"Depends on traffic." Said Todd. "Half an hour, maybe forty minutes."

Morning had begun in earnest; it took them an hour to get through the inevitable jams. Baku Journalists talked about gridlock, but Ruby knew they were still a long way from being as bad as London on a busy morning. No wondering which house, Sophie was sat on the garden wall.

"Has he said much?" Asked Ruby.

"No, we were waiting for you." Said Sophie, as she shook her head.

He was in a back room, with Charlie looking after him. No longer tied up, no one had ever been known to escape once Charlie was watching them. Their involuntary guest actually looked quite happy, considering the situation.

"Ruby....This is Rocky Carim Abadi." Said Charlotte. "It seems his dad was really into Sylvester Stallone."

"A huge fan, he has all his movies on DVD." Said Rocky.

It was hard to think of Rocky as the man who'd have quite happily shot Sophie and Charlie. He seemed harmless and Ruby hoped they didn't have to hurt him, but knew it might come to that.

"Hello Rocky, I'm Ruby....I hope we're going to honest with one another."

"I think we need more chairs." Said Todd. "I saw another two in the kitchen."

Once he was back Ruby made herself comfortable, no more than two feet away from Rocky. Kallina put her chair in a corner of the room. Ruby did the usual surface sweep of Rocky's mind, finding a lot about his girlfriend, food and football. He was a huge fan of Baki Futbol Klubu, commonly known simply as FC Baku.

"Who do you work for, Rocky?" Asked Ruby.

"I'm not allowed to say."

An image came into his head, of a man crushed against the side of a car. As they already had the dead man's wallet and credit cards, Ruby moved on.

"Why did you kill the boys, Samir and Murad?"

“They worked for him, they worked for Hasanov. He hired a lot of young guys to collect girls.”

A sordid battle was being run through Rocky’s mind. Two local gangs, both collecting any stray girls they thought wouldn’t be missed. Hasanov and Rocky’s boss had grudges against one another, which complicated things. The fate of the young girls could vary, but their lives were never pleasant.

“Just a few more questions. Does the name Max mean anything to you, Max Krause ?”

“No, I’ve never heard of him.”

“Are you sure ? Think hard.” Said Kallina.

“I’d remember a name like that, what is he, a German ?” Asked Rocky.

“No, an American....At least he was born there.” Said Kallina.

Lots of memories flooding into Rocky’s head and there was an inconsistency. A huge flaw in what they knew and what Rocky had said. Rocky wasn’t lying, about not knowing Max, but something didn’t make sense. Ruby had to tie up the loose end, or it would drive her crazy.

“Can someone get Sophie, please ?” Asked Ruby.

Todd was back with Sophie in a few seconds, with Charlie leaving the room to keep watch at the front of the house.

“Sophie, you mentioned the car Rocky was in.” Said Ruby. “Did it look to be searching for the boy’s blue car ?”

“Yes, it took them ages to find it.”

“So Rocky, if you’d killed the boys.....You’d know where you’d dumped them.” Said Ruby.

“I was confused, that’s all.” Said Rocky. “We were paid to kill them, so we killed them.”

“And then you let Hasanov’s guys take the girl.” Said Sophie. “You’re lying.”

“We were paid to kill the boys and they were dead.” Said Rocky. “Dead is dead, so why would we anger the boss with details ? The doorman at the Zengezur restaurant called us and said the boys were dead. He’d seen some other men take the girl.”

It all fitted together, sort of. The chronology was still a little off, but that was probably due to Rocky and his friend, not wanting to upset the boss. A decent police detective would follow up with interviewing the doorman at the Zengezur. Ruby wasn’t a cop; she really didn’t give a damn about who had killed who and when. Cal was safe and Max had nothing to do with any of it.

“It was all just a war between two local gangs, involved in trafficking young girls. Are you happy with that decision, Kallina ?” Asked Ruby.

“Yes, I’m happy Max is innocent....This time.”

Which left the Rocky problem. A man who knew their names and that they’d been involved in the death of his boss. The solution was obvious, but Ruby didn’t want to prove Todd and Jurgis right.

There were still lines she wouldn’t cross and things she wouldn’t do, even if it did make sense.

“Can you arrange to have Rocky kept somewhere until our plane has taken off ?” She asked Todd.

“Yes, I’m sure Jalil will know someone who can do that.”

They were outside at the car, before Kallina took her to one side.

“Chronology Ruby, chronology....The doorman said the men were dead. Then other men came for the girl. You know what that implies ?”

“Yes, Kallina....Cal killed the boys, but didn’t get away before Hasanov’s men arrived.” Said Ruby. “It really is the only order of events that makes sense. Plus, she had a lot of blood on her, a hell of a lot of blood.”

“We’re not angels ourselves. Are we worried about this ?” Asked Kallina.

“No, if anything I admire her courage. She has to accept what she’s done and be honest with us about it. Agreed ?”

“Oh yes, she must own her actions, or she’ll go crazy.....I know.”

As they got in the car, Ruby was worried about Cal, just a little. The main thing was relief though, that Baba Yaga wasn’t going to go full on psycho bitch, on Max.

~ ~

Captain George Papageorgiou of the Merchant ship Volos, was feeling a little nervous. No matter how many times he carried out a well-paid scam of some kind, he was always edgy until the containers or crates were offloaded. The empty containers weren’t really totally empty. No guns or drugs, as the person waiting for the containers was expecting. But something was in the containers. His crew weren’t fools, they knew when they were handling empty containers.

“Their lighter than they should be, but they’re not empty.” Farid had said.

“None of our business.” George had told him.

Once the containers were taken off in the Port of Rijeka, George would breathe a huge sigh of relief. As the Volos headed for the open sea, he’d feel that nothing could touch them, he always did. Silly really, the authorities had long memories and his ship could only carry so much fuel and essential supplies. The trick was to make sure all the paperwork was correct and there could be no consequences for him and his crew. Everyone knew it was impossible to load and unload containers at sea, of course they did. From Rijeka in Croatia the lorries would take the containers somewhere in Italy. After that.....He had no idea where they’d end up and he didn’t want to know.

“Did any of the port workers ask you anything ?” He asked Farid.

“No, Boss.....They never do.”

George had a bad feeling this time, a really bad feeling. The amount he’d been paid, meant whatever had been in the containers must be worth a small fortune. Guns and drugs more than likely, which tended to mean a cartel was expecting the containers to arrive. Or a corrupt regime somewhere, there were plenty of those in the world. Worse than the cartels in many ways and the cartels were bad enough. The slightest inkling that the Volos had been involved and his flayed body might turn up hanging under a freeway in a part of the world he’d never heard of.

“Nice trucks.....Brand new by the look of them.” Farid muttered.

Two new and expensive trucks were being loaded up with the, not quite empty, containers. Usually containers went on the stacks, to be collected later. Trucks waiting for containers was rare, almost unknown. It would screw up the port’s paperwork bureaucracy, so someone must have been bribed, maybe several people.

“Yeah, really nice trucks.” Said George.

There was that feeling again, a shudder. Like someone had just walked over his grave, as his grandmother would have said. The guys driving the trucks would be paid enough to deter curiosity. Full or half empty, they wouldn’t care, or even mention it to anyone. Supposing there was an unpleasant surprise for whoever opened those containers ? Modern explosive didn’t weigh that much, not the really high-tech stuff.

“Is everything signed for, Farid ?” He asked. “Is the paperwork perfect ?”

“Yeah Boss, no fuckups.....I’d bet my son’s life on it.”

Captain George Papageorgiou knew they were all betting their lives on it, his entire crew. Their families too and girlfriends, boyfriends and the lives of a few who were just acquaintances. Cartels didn’t fuck about and narco-regimes were even worse.

~ ~

Baba Yaga had once dropped Max from quite a height, quite a few times. That had been in the deserts of Kazakhstan, not far from the Caspian Sea. A soft sand and Max bounced quite well in

those days. A few broken bones and a couple of twisted joints, but on the whole, Max had come out of it fairly intact. He was a totally human of course and older now.

“Heal him, put right the damage you’ve done.” Said Ruby.

She’d been a hero then; everyone had said so. No cheering or anything, but things had been more black and white then. Now there were more areas of grey and one of those areas was Max Krause. Deep down, Baba Yaga was having trouble coming to terms with not being a hero for beating up Max. It wasn’t as if he was dead, or missing a body part. He was still a monster; she was certain of it. The bastard was just better at hiding it. Not that she could say that....Oh no. Telling the truth about Max would just cause more sad and disappointed comments from Ruby.

“I’ll need a while.....I don’t want to miss anything.” She said.

“Don’t think I’m leaving the room.” Said Monique. “I’m staying here, to keep an eye on both of you.”

“You’re not being asked to leave.” Said Ruby.

Fucking someone up was easier and far more fun than un-fucking them up. Healing Max was going to be satisfying, in a way, but she’d have preferred to have been dropping him over the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, from about eight thousand feet. Baba Yaga passed her hands across his face, before running them over his body.

“No brain damage, he should be his usual self when he wakes.” She said. “A lot of bruising and a dislodged vertebra in his neck.....All easily fixed.”

“You’re a monster.” Said Monique.

“Shush, she needs to concentrate.” Said Ruby.

Ideally Max should have been naked, but she’d talked Ruby into leaving him dressed. Baba Yaga was confident her healing would work through his clothes. Seeing the bruises wouldn’t help the healing process and was just likely to turn Monique into a shrieking person again. Baba Yaga’s hand became covered in a bright blue, visible aura.

“What’s that ? What are you doing ?” Asked Monique.

“It’s how I heal the injured.” Said Baba Yaga. “You have my word, Monique; he’ll be as good as new when I’m finished. Maybe better, he has quite a few old wounds that have caused long term problems. I can heal his stiff joints and ease his arthritis a little.”

Max had been middle aged when he’d first come after the wunderkinds. That had been a few years back and he was now probably hitting retirement age. Baba Yaga could do a lot, but curing the problems that arrived with old age.....That was beyond even her skills.

“There, his neck is healed.” She said.

Baba Yaga found the clot near a lung. A clot caused by trauma, her creation. It was bad, Max could have easily died if the clot had moved. Easy to disperse, once she knew where it was. It mattered though, because Max mattered to Ruby. They could so easily have been arranging for Monique to take his body home. She didn’t speak again until Max was as good as he she could make him. There was no term for blueprinting a human, but she’d come pretty close to blueprinting Max.

“There, everything taken care of, though I recommend he rests for a few days.”

“I’ll let him know, and.....Thank you.” Said Monique.

Back as Kallina again and there was a need to confess. She might tell Ruby about the clot, eventually, once they were on the plane and a long way from Baku. She trusted Ruby, but knew she was quite capable of dumping her, with an air ticket back to.....Kallina wondered where she considered to be her home ? Being honest with herself, she didn’t know.

Gérard Villand had invited Mara to be present when he met Ronald Kelly, from the UK Foreign Office. Not really their man in Paris of course, he knew Ronald was part of the security services oversight department, run by Sir Edwin Fox. Overseeing what was the big question ? Villand suspected Ronald had come to make him an offer he couldn't refuse, which made it important for Mara to know everything. Gérard wasn't getting any younger of course, but his father had lived to a good age. There had also been an uncle, who'd lived to be a hundred and two, so he wasn't planning to die anytime soon. Mara was his chosen heir though, which meant she'd be running the business, one day. He was currently looking through a grubby window. Watching Ronald getting into a Lexus being driven by one of his team.

"I liked him." Said Mara. "I don't fully trust him, but I'm glad you didn't have him brought here in the back of a van."

"Yes, I think we can work with Ronald." Said Gérard. "Coffee next, I think. The decent stuff from the place three doors down. Pastries too, we've earned a little treat."

"I'll go and get them. Any preference for the pastries ?"

"No Mara, get Aria to go, or one of the others." He said.

It mattered to him that everyone respected Mara and thought of her as the leader in waiting. He also realised he had been using her for quite a few menial tasks. It would be hard to break the habit, but he'd work at it. Aria brought in the coffee and a couple of fresh-looking croissants.

"So Mara, tell me how you thought that meeting went ?" He asked.

"It was nice to have the unofficial support we've had from the Americans, firmed up a bit. Getting a phone number for a Paris CIA contact confirms it. They'll help if Gallaan refuse to back off."

She was smart and happy now he'd found her a new apartment in a decent area. A good neighbourhood that wasn't a difficult commute into the city centre. The apartment had been expensive, but he didn't want to put her into yet another short-term rental.

"Are you happy that we had to agree to a truce with Gallaan ?" He asked.

"No....But realistically, it was the only possible outcome." Said Mara. "Neither side really wanted a war."

The croissant was good, far better than the coffee. They'd be moving offices again soon though and the next coffee place just down the street, might be better. He'd already worked out their next move with Gallaan, but wanted to hear what she thought.

"What next though, Mara ? Do we simply ignore Gallaan Industries from today ?" He asked.

"Oh no, we can't do that. We have no idea if they'll honour the deal. We have to keep them under very careful surveillance, for a while."

"How long for ?"

"Oh, at least six months, maybe a year."

The coffee tasted better, which was probably because Mara had come up with the same idea he'd been thinking of. He'd often noticed that things tasted better, when he was in a good mood.

"I'd have said just six months." He said. "We'll make it nine....I'll leave you to brief the surveillance team you pick."

~ ~

Elio Fulci hadn't wanted to be there when the containers were opened, but he had no choice. Turn up or forfeit your commission. He'd dealt with the Russian military before and they never made idle threats. Officially the containers had been unloaded in Italy, a large consignment of garden furniture. The paperwork would be right, it was one of the things Elio prided himself on. In reality, the trucks had crossed the border into Slovenia. A quiet spot where border security was almost non-existent.

Where would the containers go after Slovenia ? Elio didn't know and didn't want to. The trick to survival in the transportation of illegal cargoes, was to have zero curiosity.

"It's freezing.....Get them opened up." Said Niko.

Niko didn't like the cold; he'd moaned about it several times. A Russian, or maybe a Serb, Elio wasn't sure. His name almost certainly wasn't Niko, but that didn't matter. If the goods in the container were as expected, Niko would authorise Elio's commission payment. US Dollars had been agreed upon, a nice solid currency he could then transfer to an offshore account in Panama.

"Oh, I hate winters in the East." Said Niko. "Where are we, exactly ?"

"Kobarid, a small town made famous by Hemmingway in one of his books." Said Elio. "There are a lot of places to get breakfast and warm up, once we're finished."

"What was the book called ?" Asked Niko.

"A Farewell to Arms.....It's quite famous."

Niko, who was probably a Dimitri or a Boris, grunted at him. It was cold, Elio could feel his toes going a bit numb. He'd never been to Kobarid in Slovenia before, but he always did his homework. Get to know the place where you're doing business, just in case. Elio had no idea how it worked, but he had a nose for trouble. It was how he'd outlived several business partners. Something wasn't right, something was going to bite him on the arse. He had no idea what, but he was rarely wrong.

"Come on, cut the fucking seals off if you have to." Yelled Niko.

They were using a large car park at the historical site of Napoleon's Bridge. The area was full of history, but no tourists that early on a very cold morning. Soon they'd all be there, with their dreadful children and digital cameras. Currently though, they had the large car park all to themselves.

"Alright.....This one is open." Someone yelled.

"Don't piss about." Shouted Niko. "Open them all up...I need to inspect everything."

Niko's people had arrived from the East, though Elio had no idea where from. Probably armed, though he couldn't be sure. Five of them, four men and one woman. Elio just had his driver with him, Mikołaj. The ex-polish army soldier had been with his family for years. Mikołaj was armed and there was no doubting his bravery, but he'd lived a soft life for decades and was in his sixties. If it came to fighting his way out, Elio felt massively outgunned.

"This doesn't look right." Yelled the woman.

"What now ?" Muttered Niko.

Elio hoped it was something minor, but his nose for trouble was telling him otherwise. Still on the trucks, all the containers were now opened, ready for inspection. One of Niko's men was aiming a flashlight inside one of them.

"It's garden furniture, it's half full of garden furniture." Said Niko.

New garden furniture, most of it flat packed and in boxes. The plastic chairs were stacked at the far end of the container. Not a full container and nothing had been secured in place. Several of the boxes had burst open, probably while crossing the Adriatic. There was no doubting the evidence of his eyes. The container held nothing but cheap garden furniture.

"This one is the same." Yelled the woman.

Anger kept growing as every container was found to hold nothing but the same make of plastic garden furniture. Like a huge cloud of negative energy, the anger covered everything, contaminating everyone. No guns came out, until the last container had been examined. Two of Niko's men were aiming handguns at him.

"I have no idea how this happened." Said Elio. "I was there when the containers were sealed and everything was fine."

Niko was looking at him, as if trying to gauge his guilt by simply staring. Elio knew it was about fifty-fifty, whether he'd die then and there, or be taken away for torture and death somewhere else.

Neither outcome was how he'd hoped the day would go.

"Well.....You came here." Said Niko. "That has to count in your favour."

Mikołaj chose that moment to come to the rescue. He ran at Niko's men, waving a heavy old revolver. Elio knew the outcome, before it happened. The woman shot his driver in the chest, before he'd got closer than twenty feet away. Not a perfect kill, poor Mikołaj was writhing about on the ground, while moaning in pain. The woman moved closer, her second shot going into the back of his driver's head. Elio said nothing, but raised his hands as a symbolic gesture.

"You're coming to explain this to the colonel." Said Niko. "Be warned though.....He has a thing about people he thinks are making excuses for their failure."

It took them no time at all to bind his wrists and ankles with cable ties. Gagged too, before being shoved into the pile of garden furniture in the first container they'd opened. Elio fell off the furniture, his nose colliding with the metal floor. The floor was cold against his face, unbearably cold.

~ ~

There had been several deaths in Baku, even if most of them were criminals. Then Abe and Caleb were worried that some of their exploits might have been recorded on a camera outside the Zengezur restaurant. The original plan had been to spend another day in the city, but Ruby had decided to leave early. No appearance of leaving on the run of course, no checking out in the middle of the night. They'd told the reception desk to finalise the bill and book them taxis for the airport. A few items in transit were being re-routed to the next place their Antonov was due to land. Where was that likely to be? Rumours were running rife, but there was nothing definite about their next destination. A few of Ruby's close circle would know, but Cal wasn't one of them. She was packing her things, which seemed to need more cases than she'd arrived with. From a small shoulder bag when they'd come aboard the Ajax, she now had two full holdalls and an almost full, carry-on bag. There was a knock on her door. Abe was there, looking at the mess in her room. Cal liked buying clothes, but folding and packing them, was a skill she was still working on.

"Oh, Calaso.....Get everything packed." Said Abe. "And, before I forget. Ruby wants to see you when you've got a free moment."

"Where is she? I'll go right away."

"Try her room, she was in there twenty minutes ago."

On the way Cal walked past several of the hotel staff, who all smiled at her. Yes, it was part of their job to be nice to guests, but it still made her feel good. She knocked on the door of the room Ruby shared with Todd. A mini-suite really, with its own lounge area and even a tiny area to prepare simple meals. Todd answered the door.

"Come in, Cal. Ruby's sat in the lounge. I'm going to make sure we've got a take-off slot."

It was chaos, but organised chaos, with Ruby at the centre of it all. Sophie was in the lounge, talking about the availability of fuel where they were going. Spider was there too, looking out of the window. Guarding her maybe, or just how he behaved.

"Ahhh.... Cal is here." Said Ruby. "I'm going to have to ask you to give me a few minutes, Sophie. And Spider, please make sure we're not disturbed."

"A quickie.....Are we heading for our A destination, or B, the alternate?" Asked Sophie.

"It's B, Sophie.....A was never a serious choice. Now shoo....Give Cal and I a little privacy."

Cal wasn't stupid, she knew that being with a group of special people who could read minds, that her secret wouldn't remain a secret. She'd kept so many secrets for her brother over the years. It had taught her to never give up a secret, unless there was no alternative.

"Sit, Cal. Pull a chair close to me." Said Ruby. "I'm sure you know why I asked to see you."

"Not really, you must be so busy."

"I haven't looked into your mind, but I could." Said Ruby. "Show me the blade you used."

She'd taken the weapon off the body of a dead soldier, after the raid on Max's compound. A wicked looking blade that was quite short, but incredibly sharp. It folded up into itself and locked open when needed. Very thin and compact, there were numerous places where she could hide it in her clothing. Cal loved the blade and hoped Ruby wasn't about to take it from her.

"It's clean, I cleaned it properly." Said Cal.

"I'm sure you did. Just the bullet points, Cal. Tell me about killing the boys?"

Cal had several versions of that night, mentally practised and ready to tell in a convincing way. Sat next to Ruby, who was smiling at her.....She chose to tell her the truth.

"I felt so stupid when Samir said they were taking me to someone who paid money for girls like me, runaways. Murad hadn't wanted to, but Samir.....He was a bastard. He talked about me as though I wasn't there, discussing what he'd buy with the money. I was nothing to them, they hadn't even searched me."

"But you had the blade....."

"Yes, I had the blade. We were in their car, waiting for the men to arrive, the ones with pockets full of money. That was what Murad said. I used the blade on Samir first and Murad looked terrified. I'd been thinking about killing them....In the end, actually doing it. It felt so easy, though I did throw up after I'd done it."

"The truth now.....I need the truth." Said Ruby. "Have you ever done anything like this before?"

"There was Aamiina, a girl at school."

"What did you do to her?"

"She was being mean, so I hit her on the nose."

Ruby actually laughed and gave her back the blade.

"I'll ask Spider to train you when we get where we're going." Said Ruby. "He has a lot of experience in street fighting. I could also ask McGill to let you train with his marauders, if you'd like that?"

"Oh, I would.....I'd really like that. Where are we going next?"

"You'll find out when we get there, Calaso Duale."

~

~

It was interfering with their tradition of sex at take-offs and landings, but Ruby wanted to be with the pilots as the huge Antonov lifted its wheel and departed from Baku. They were leaving some unpleasant baggage in the city, sadly not for the first time. She couldn't relax until they were in the air and cruising at fifty thousand feet.

"Ahhh, flies like a dream." Said the pilot.

"Any problems with Russian air traffic control?" Asked Ruby.

"No, you obviously know the right people."

It was going to work, hiding in just about the last place anyone would expect, was going to work. Ruby held Todd's hand and took him to their room, with the mattress on the floor. A bit late, but that might actually improve the sex. Keeping up a good rhythm wasn't easy during take-off, especially if there was a bit of turbulence.

"I must admit." Said Todd. "When you talked about going to Moscow, I was a bit surprised."

“Not Moscow, we’re going to Kaluga. I will admit though, it isn’t far from Moscow. We’ve got full clearance to land at Grabtsevo Airport. With luck we’ll have an empty hangar to train in. I’ve been arranging it, on and off, between the various dramas in Baku. Am I just unlucky, or really crap at keeping them under control ?”

“Crazy superkids, military types and a genuine witch.” Said Todd. “No one could keep them well behaved. They’ll all be ready once we get to Norway.”

“You’ve got a point, though you could have said it was just bad luck.” Said Ruby.

She tickled him, he was very ticklish. That became touching, which eventually became instinctive thrusting and thrusting back. And yes, it was better with the aircraft on smooth and level flight. Still hot and covered in sweat, Ruby had a thought.

“Damn, I don’t think Cal and Abe have cold weather clothing.”

“I’m sure we can buy them some.” Said Todd. “Who is the contact who managed to get us VIP treatment at a Russian airport ? You never did say.”

“Not one person, several persons.” Said Ruby. “You’ll see, they’ll be meeting us in Kaluga. I don’t want to spoil the surprise.”

~ ~

© Ed Cowling ~ December 2022