



Code Name: Zeppelin

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Category: Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia, Action

Description: A man of silence.

A man of rigid precision.

Zeppelin is your worst nightmare, coming in quiet and wreaking havoc on his enemies.

Incredibly smart and unbelievably stealthy, I take my name “Zeppelin” seriously. As a Brit who worked for the United States NSA and NRO, I’m experienced and wise, with a penchant for technology. Traffickers can never get by me, and they never even see me coming.

Teaming up with the intelligent and hellbent super spy Alena, has our enemies reeling with fear. They know they’re no match for us.

Once we’ve completed this perilous mission, this team isn’t done. I’ve got plans for us—together. And that’s a promise I don’t take lightly.

Total Pages (Source): 92

1

ZEPPELIN

“You and Verity will be going undercover as Jack and Elise Evans, a couple on their honeymoon. I’ve scheduled your flight to St. Moritz this afternoon.”

“Saint Moritz?” Verity, bane of my existence, and I gasped at the same time.

Nemesis, head of the UN Coalition Against Human Trafficking and my commander for the duration of this assignment, folded her arms and leveled her steely gaze in my direction. “As you’re aware, we’ve received intelligence indicating it’s where AMPS has moved their money.”

While she’d said we’ve received intelligence, it was Verity who tracked the millions of dollars the largest human trafficking ring in the world had moved out of Mauritian banks and into Swiss offshore accounts.

“But—”

“Zeppelin, while I would normally leave it to you to craft the missions your task force undertakes, in this case, I’m making the suggestion.”

In the world of intelligence, when a superior uttered the word “suggestion,” it was widely accepted to mean “order.”

“Ma’am, you cannot be serious,” Verity ventured.

“I could not be more so.” Nemesis walked away. Was it my imagination, or was the woman smirking?

Alena “Verity” Curran, the woman I’d soon have to pretend I loved as much as I detested her, had recently been promoted to Unit 23—the UK’s most secretive and deadly team of intelligence agents.

I was happy for her when the unit’s commander made the announcement, but happier for me, given it meant I’d no longer have to see her, talk to her, or even think about her after she transitioned over.

Whatever elation I’d felt was short-lived when the unit’s leader, Typhon, added. “For now, Verity will remain on permanent loan to the coalition, thus able to continue her role.” I was the commander of one of the coalition’s task forces. Verity was a subordinate—a role she’d refused to take. In fact, more often than not, she behaved as if she were of a higher rank.

Every word she uttered made me crazy. It was almost as if she argued with me just for the sake of doing so. The number of times I’d wanted to throttle her was only equal to one other thing—how often I’d wanted to strip her bare and fuck her senseless.

First, though, I had to get her removed from the undercover op. There was no way I’d be able to endure spending hours with her, let alone days or weeks.

—Verity—

I knew what Zeppelin was thinking. For all his arrogance, the man had no idea how easy he was to read.

The look on his face when Nemesis announced we were to go undercover

together—as a newly married couple, no less—nearly made me laugh out loud. I would have done so if I wasn't equally chagrined.

I detested everything about the man, mainly because, worse than disliking him, he showed me zero respect. No doubt, we'd have yet another battle of wills when it came to me playing the role of his wife. I could only imagine how the misogynistic asshole would treat a spouse in real life. The women he'd been linked with in the past were of the supermodel ilk. And yes, I'd looked into them.

They were all tall, reed-thin, and beautiful, at least when done up in makeup thick as pancake batter. He seemed particularly attracted to those who accentuated their otherwise plank-like figure with exceedingly large breast enhancements. On the other hand, their brains were likely the size of a bird's. Or smaller.

Given I was their opposite, I wondered if Zeppelin possessed the ability to play the role of a man enamored with his new wife.

God, help me. It wouldn't be as difficult for me. As long as he kept his bloody mouth shut, I could drool over him for days. There was a certain way he leveled his icy blue eyes at me that all but melted my panties. Not to mention his body. Henry "Zeppelin" Bonham looked like he'd been sculpted from stone. Every bit of him was defined muscle. While six-pack abs were all the rage, I'd counted eight when I happened to see him shedding his tactical gear after one of our ops in Malta. My cheeks still flamed when remembering his smirk when he'd caught me looking.

Right now, his brown hair with natural ash-blond highlights was long enough to sometimes hang in his eyes. More than once, I'd caught myself right before reaching up to brush it from his forehead.

One word from him, though, never failed to jar me out of my haze of lust. A single syllable was like nails on a chalkboard. Every utterance raised my hackles.

“Verity, are you all right?”

My neck snapped when I quickly turned my head to face Nemesis, who I hadn’t noticed return to my side. “Of course. Why do you ask?”

Her eyes darted to Zeppelin, who stood talking with Magnet. “No reason.”

I sighed. “To be honest, I cannot imagine two people less well-suited for what you’ve asked of us. Our mutual abhorrence seeps from our pores.”

“Does it? I hadn’t noticed.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:38 am

I raised a brow.

Nem leaned forward and spoke in a hushed tone of voice. “Listen to me. This op is one you’ll excel at like no one else on any task force in the coalition. Frankly, I’d fight Typhon tooth and nail if he attempted to pull you exclusively into Unit 23 in advance of this deployment. There’s a reason—several, actually—why you were tapped for the unit. One, you’re bloody brilliant. Two, and pardon my language, but you’re lethal as fuck. Three, no one outside of perhaps Typhon and me knows what else you’re capable of. You’re literally the second coming of Virginia Robbins.”

The former Chief of Disguise at the CIA had retired in the early nineties but was still considered to be the master of what she called “deceptive transformation.” She could seemingly change ethnicity on demand. While I didn’t profess to have the same level of skill, I did possess the ability to metamorphose myself in such a way that I was nearly unrecognizable even to people who knew me.

“As for Zeppelin, he is right to say he owns this part of the mission,” she continued. “He has the power to assign someone in his place, and if he did, I would abide by that decision. However, your assignment is my call to make. He can bloody well live with it.” The last part, she added under her breath.

Would he, though? Would I? Or would one of us kill the other within the op’s first few hours?

2

ZEPPELIN

“You all right, mate?” asked my best friend, Magnet, who was abundantly aware of my dislike of the woman I was about to pretend I’d married.

“What the fuck is Nemesis thinking?” I muttered after we’d walked several paces away from the others. “Verity has one foot out the bloody door, for cripes’ sake.”

He shrugged. “Weareworking jointly with Unit 23.”

I glared at him. “Begrudgingly so. Plus, Nemesis said Typhon agreed to allow Verity to remain on the task force until a replacement could be found.”

“Not quite the way I remember it.”

I glared at him.

“What? That isn’t how he phrased it at all. He said?—”

“Bugger off. I know what he said,” I seethed.

Even if I had my druthers and actively sought to replace Verity, there wasn’t time. We’d been hunting AMPS for close to a year, and while we’d taken down two people we believed were key players, that they’d died before we could interrogate them had left the trail for the others ice cold.

For now, our strongest lead was in following the money, something Verity was damned good at. As much as I abhorred her, her prowess at forensic accounting was undeniable.

Magnet motioned with his chin to wheremynemesis sat talking with our commander, Nemesis. “Think she’s trying to get you taken off the assignment?”

“My op,” I muttered. “If she wants out, I encourage her to ask, but no one is removing me from an investigation taking place in the very country where I serve as task force commander.” I studied them, trying to get a read on their conversation. Every so often, Verity would glance in my direction, but I refused to act like I’d backed down. Clearly, neither would she.

The woman drove me mad—unfortunately, in more ways than one. While I’d never admit it, especially to Magnet, who would give me endless shit about it, I’d noticed how hot Verity was the first time I saw her. While her bitchiness drove me crazy, the idea of going undercover as a newly married couple and using the opportunity to get my hands on her—at least in public—had my cock hardening enough to require I adjust my trousers.

I’d packed my gear and taken it downstairs when Nemesis asked to speak with Verity and me again. Had she seen the error of her ways, and instead of the two of us working together, would she be reassigned? Or had Typhon changed his mind about the length of time he’d be willing to “loan” her to the coalition?

“You’ll need these.” Disappointment and relief warred inside me when, instead, she handed a small box to each of us.

Relief? Where had that come from? Other than one centrally located part of my anatomy, the rest of me wanted Verity out of sight and mind.

When neither of us reached for the boxes Nem held, she sighed. “This is an undercover assignment, for God’s sake. I expected more from the two of you than the childish behavior you’re exhibiting.”

Verity picked up the box closest to her but waited until I’d done the same before opening it.

“Wow,” I heard her gasp when she lifted the cover.

“Given you’ll be moving in affluent circles, amongst the type of people who would deposit large amounts of money in offshore accounts, I chose rings befitting the assignment.”

While far less ostentatious than Verity’s, the thick platinum band felt heavy and uncomfortable on my hand. Considering I’d never entertained the idea of marrying, I didn’t think about wearing a wedding band. As much as I didn’t like the feel of this one, I doubted it was something I’d ever agree to do. Not that I’d be in a position to disagree. Marriage seemed like something older people did. However, among my peers, I was the same age as most who had recently gotten hitched.

Age aside, I hadn’t met anyone I’d consider spending more than a few weeks with, let alone a lifetime.

“You should make a habit of wearing it,” suggested Nem when I removed it from my finger. “You need to get used to it.” She glared at me until I slid it back on.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:38 am

“What about her?” I said, pointing to Verity’s ring still nestled in the box.

“You too,” said Nem, nudging her.

Verity’s eyes met mine, then her gaze returned to the ring. The look of distaste on her face nearly made me laugh. Knowing how much she’d hate having to do the same, I resolved to wear mine twenty-four seven and give her plenty of shit if she didn’t. Like Nem, I nudged her.

“Sod off,” she said under her breath, removing the multi-carat diamond ring from the box.

“May I?” I asked, opening my palm.

“Not on your life,” she responded, all but jamming it on her finger. “You’re such an asshole,” she added when I threw my head back and laughed at her reaction.

“Your plane departs out of Gatwick at seventeen hundred. It’s a two-hour flight to Zurich. From there, you’ll be transported via helicopter to St. Moritz. Reaper, who will be undercover at the resort as an American on holiday, will provide any backup and support you need. He’ll travel with you as far as Zurich, where alternate transportation has been arranged to take him to the resort.

“When you arrive, you’ll be met by two agents—Lars Persson, code name Macht, and Prisca Baur, code name Schön. Both are mid-level agents with Switzerland’s Strategic Intelligence Service. Schön has been recommended to fill one of the open slots left in your task force, Zeppelin. This assignment will give you time to get to

know her and determine if she'll be a good fit.”

I was down two agents on my team. Conor “Rogue” Kincaid and Anouk “Ehren” Richter had recently transitioned to Magnet’s Albanian task force to replace Frick “Zig” Ziegler and Drita “Qetë” Hoffman, who were killed during an op that took place in the Straits of Tiran, not far off the coast of Sharm el-Sheikh. Many agents had almost lost their lives that night, myself included.

When I heard Nemesis say my name, I snapped back from my thoughts. “Yes, apologies. What did you say?”

“Both agents are undercover, working in guest services at the resort where you’ll stay for the duration of the op. Macht is quite familiar with the region, St. Moritz specifically. Schön speaks fluent French, Swiss German, traditional German, and English. Any questions?”

I had several, starting with whether Nemesis was sure teaming me up with Verity was a sound decision.

At present, Reaper was the only agent remaining on my team. Unless Nemesis intended for Verity to join at the conclusion of this op. If that was her plan, it would be over my dead body.

“Who suggested Schön for my task force?”

“Baissier.”

Admittedly, I was surprised Nem had agreed to a recommendation from the French ambassador to the United Nations—particularly on my behalf.

Henri “Baissier” Marchand was responsible for forming the international

organization's coalition against human trafficking. It consisted of five task forces, coinciding with the current security council. While I was from the UK and employed by Military Intelligence, Section 6, I'd been named commander of the Swiss task force, given the size of their intelligence team made it difficult for them to spare anyone on my level.

Magnet, also an MI6 agent, was the commander of the Albanian team for the same reason.

The other three task forces were from the UK, the US, and Malta.

After the unprecedented success of its first mission, Nemesis, then-commander of the UK team, was promoted to head of the coalition. That hadn't stopped Baissier from sticking his nose in far more often than Nem would've liked, given the man's career was in diplomacy, not intelligence.

"Oh my God," I heard Verity groan. I glanced at the photo on Nem's laptop.

"Is that Schön?" I asked, my eyes nearly popping out of my head.

"Do attempt to restrain yourself, Zeppelin. It would hardly do for you to be seen cheating on your new bride the same day we arrive on our honeymoon," Verity practically growled at me.

Without question, getting into Schön's pants would be tempting. She was beautiful, and those breasts—Lord, help me.

Verity folded her arms, unwittingly making it difficult for me not to ogle hers too. "You cannot possibly believe this is going to work," she said to Nemesis.

"I have every confidence in your shared professionalism," she responded before

returning to her laptop. “Briefs outlining your objectives and undercover personas have been forwarded to Reaper and the two of you. You’ll have time to review them on the flight. Magnet will transport you to Gatwick at sixteen hundred.”

“I need a fucking drink,” I said, approaching Magnet after Nem dismissed us. “Too bad there’s no time for us to hit the pub.”

Mag put his hand on my shoulder. “We can hit the bottle in the kitchen instead.”

“I knew there was a reason you’re my best mate,” I mumbled as I followed him out of one room and into another. “What the fuck am I gonna do, Mag?”

He poured two fingers for each of us, then raised his glass. “Figure out how the hell you’re gonna keep your hands off her.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:38 am

I shot what was in the glass and waited while he poured another. “Like I said, there’s a reason you’re my best mate.” After downing the second two fingers, I slammed the glass on the counter, bottoms up. “I’m so screwed.”

Rather than give me shit, Mag shook his head and looked down at my glass. “Truer words have rarely been spoken.”

“Wasn’t Albania sending an agent to join your team?” I asked, wanting to get off the subject of the woman I’d be spending countless hours with over the course of the next few weeks. “We could suggest a switch.”

“Albania is rethinking her involvement. Besides, she wouldn’t have been as qualified for this op as Verity.”

I nodded. He was right. “Why is Albanian rethinking her involvement?”

“Apparently, their director of intelligence is unwilling to let her go.”

I knew the loss of two agents on his team weighed heavily on Magnet, and, like me, he didn’t appreciate others choosing replacements on his behalf. As task force commanders, that should be our responsibility.

When it wastime to leave, I offered the front passenger seat to Verity, but when I opened the door, she went around to the opposite side and got in the backseat instead, as did Reaper.

“I heard Schön is joining your team,” said Mag as we drove out of Cayman Trace’s

estate. It had served as our command center since the inception of the coalition.

“I know nothing about her. You do?”

Mag glanced in the rearview mirror, then at me. “I can’t believe you haven’t gotten wind yet. She’s the talk of intelligence circles worldwide.” He took a second look in the mirror, then mouthed, “Honey trap.”

I couldn’t tell if he was serious or just trying to get a reaction out of Verity. I looked over my shoulder to where she sat behind him. Her arms were folded the same way they had been earlier, and her head was turned so I couldn’t see her face. Before, I’d momentarily considered suggesting Schön take her place on the op for the sole purpose of annoying the woman. However, I was glad I’d held back. The way she was hunched made me wonder if the haughty and equally bossy woman was feeling insecure.

As often as she made me want to wring her neck, Verity was a good agent. I didn’t necessarily believe she was Unit 23 caliber, but who was I to judge?

My eyes met Mag’s, and I shook my head. He nodded and kept quiet for the duration of the drive.

3

VERITY

I seethed the entire way to the airfield. I’d say it was due to the objectification of a fellow female agent, but I’d be lying. I saw the way Zeppelin’s eyes had lit up when Nemesis shared Schön’s photo. Even I had to admit she was extraordinarily beautiful, and that left me feeling ugly and dull.

She was the equivalent of every supermodel-type Zeppelin was seen with in the past, with one vital exception. She also had brains. No intelligence agent made it on looks alone. I was surprised he hadn't suggested she be his undercover wife the minute he saw her photo. No doubt it had crossed his mind.

Then, when Magnet said she was the talk of other agents worldwide, I felt immediately transported back to year eight when I was often mistaken for a boy due to the short haircut I sported. Once my true gender was revealed, I was teased mercilessly for not being a bloke. Coupled with getting marks far exceeding those of my peers, which escalated my advancement through higher-level courses, I was the epitome of a wonk.

I'd distract myself by reviewing the brief Nemesis sent, but if I waited until we were on the plane, it would give me a reason to refrain from conversing with Zeppelin. That and my propensity for car sickness factored into my decision. It was a wonder, given all my foibles, that Typhon had considered me for Unit 23 at all.

When he'd said he'd agree to allow me to remain on permanent loan to the coalition, part of me couldn't help but wonder if he was regretting his decision to hire me. I prayed not. I'd certainly never live it down with Zeppelin.

When I turned my head in the opposite direction, I caught him studying me. I had to bite my tongue to stop myself from asking why. Instead, I stared right back at him. Thinking I saw the glimmer of something akin to admiration, I snickered and looked away. Most likely, he was comparing me to Schön and what I actually saw was his amusement at my shortcomings.

When Magnet pulled up to the hangar, I thanked him for the lift, exited the vehicle, and approached the private aircraft that would take us to Zurich.

"Hello, Verity," I heard a woman's voice say from inside the plane.

I looked up. “Angel, is that you?” I rushed up the steps to hug the woman who’d been a former roommate at Fort Monckton and was one of my closest friends. “How are you?”

“When I saw your name pop up on the flight plan, I immediately signed up for the last-minute jaunt to Zurich,” she said after we’d cheek-kissed.

“Wow, it’s good to see you. It’s been far too long.”

She nodded and squeezed my hand. “We have a lot of catching up to do.”

“Are you able to stay on at all?” I asked before I thought better of it. Since Zeppelin and I were supposed to be undercover as honeymooners, it would hardly do for me to be seen at dinner with Angel. Unless, of course, he ditched me to spend time with Schön. If that happened, perhaps Angel and I could arrange for room service instead.

When someone cleared his throat, I stepped to the side to let Reaper pass. I expected Zeppelin to follow, but he stood outside the flight deck with us.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:38 am

“Angel,” he said, cheek-kissing her like she and I had. “Who’s flying with you today?”

“Condor. We flipped for first chair,” she informed him when he glanced into the cockpit and saw the man seated in the second officer’s place.

I, on the other hand, tried to scoot around him to take a seat.

“Hello, Ver,” I heard Condor say before I had the chance. Davion Todd was given the code name due to his size, for the most part. At six feet seven inches, he was massive for a pilot.

He’d pursued me during a six-week deployment a few years ago. While I’d been tempted to go out with him, it was early enough in my career that fraternization with fellow agents felt too risky.

“Do you two know each other?” Zeppelin asked, looking from Condor to me.

“Verity is the one who got away,” Condor responded, leaning in to kiss me, but not in the customary way.

“Is that right?” Zeppelin muttered. “You know we’re undercover as husband and wife,” he added, eyeing Condor in a way that looked shockingly possessive.

“I would’ve liked to be in the running for that assignment,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows.

Angel put one hand on Zeppelin's chest and the other on Condor's. "All right, you two. Back off and give my girl some space. If anyone has dibs on dinner with her tonight, it's me."

"We could always double-date, if you will. That way, we can all spend time with Ver," said Condor.

"You're both traveling on to St. Moritz?" Zeppelin asked.

"No, but since you asked...I'd be up for it."

"This is ridiculous." I threw my hands up when Zeppelin scowled in my direction. "If you'll excuse me, I've a brief to read." I walked to the aft of the small plane and took the seat farthest from the cockpit, then put in my noise-canceling earbuds. "What?" I removed one and snapped when Zep sat next to me.

"I don't think it's a good idea to be seen out with other people on our first night in town."

"I doubt Condor was serious."

He shook his head. "You're wrong. He's trying to convince Angel to get approval for them to travel with us beyond Zurich."

"She'll never agree to it, and even if she did, it doesn't matter. We're not on holiday. We have work to do."

"I wondered if you'd forgotten."

I opened my mouth, closed it, then regrettably opened it again. "Me? You were the one drooling on Nem's mobile when she showed you the photo of Schön." I wanted

to take back the words as soon as I'd said them, particularly when Zeppelin smirked as though he suddenly had the upper hand.

Rather than get up and move to another seat, he leaned back, folded his hands on his stomach, and closed his eyes.

“What are you doing?”

He opened one eye and glanced at me. “What’s it look like?”

“I don’t know, but go do it elsewhere. I took this seat intentionally.”

“To get as far away as possible from Gigantor?”

I stuck the earbud back in. “Go away, Zeppelin.” I resumed reading the brief from Nem but jumped when he reached over and removed the device from my ear.

“We have work to do,” he griped.

When I tried to grab it back, he held his arm out in the opposite direction.

“You are maddening,” I spat, grabbing my laptop and bag.

His hand brushed mine as I walked around him. “Maddening,” I heard him whisper.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:38 am

I extended my palm, and he placed the bud in it. Without thanking him, I walked to the first row of the aircraft, hoping he wouldn't follow, yet somewhat disappointed when he didn't.

“Good God, what was that all about?” Angel asked partway through the flight when she came out to use the loo.

I rolled my eyes and nodded, unsure what to say in response.

She sat in the seat beside me and leaned close. “So...you and Zep?”

“What?” I gasped. “No. Absolutely, unequivocally, no. We're on assignment, tracking the vilest of human traffickers, by the way.”

“You're right. Apologies.”

“Truth be told, I hate him.”

Angel raised a brow.

“I mean it. I hate him.”

When she nodded and patted my hand before returning to the cockpit, I knew I'd bared my soul to her in a way I never could with Zeppelin.

Once she was gone, I stepped into the lavatory. Within minutes, I'd transformed my brown eyes to blue and my long dark hair to shoulder-length sandy-blonde, pulled

into a tight bun. After the addition of dark and dramatic brows, an excess of eye shadow, liner, mascara, and pale pink lipstick, even those on the plane might have a hard time recognizing me. Except Angel, of course, who was familiar with several of my go-to disguises.

The final alteration to my appearance was something Zeppelin would certainly appreciate. I removed my C-cup and donned the specially made double-D, which I topped with a tight, black pullover turtleneck.

Below the waist, I wore the same jeans, but rather than tan flats, I put on a pair of black stiletto booties.

While I didn't anticipate either Schön or Macht would meet us here, in Zurich, I donned the disguise on the flight anyway since I wouldn't have the opportunity prior to meeting them in St. Moritz.

It was imperative no one, other agents included, recognized me. The sole exception was within the tight-knit circle of SIS, and even then, only those above a certain level of security clearance knew who I was. Even before I was tapped to join Unit 23, my identity—including photos—was entirely wiped.

As an MI6 agent and the Swiss task force commander, Zeppelin's likeness was also closely guarded, but not to the extent mine was and would be for the rest of my career, if not life.

After we landed, I noticed an SUV waiting on the tarmac, close to where Angel taxied the plane. I guessed it was there to transport us from the main airfield to the helipad.

"Whoa!" Condor exclaimed, studying the difference in my appearance as I picked up my bags and headed out the plane's door. "Let me help you with that," he offered, stepping out of the cockpit.

“I’ve got it, but thanks.” While he might be able to best me in sheer size, I was a warrior, or as Angel used to say, one fucking badass bitch. I could carry my own bloody bag.

I was at the bottom of the airstairs before I heard my friend calling out for me to wait. “Sorry,” I said when Angel caught up.

“I’m the one who’s sorry. Condor and I just received orders to return to London immediately,” she said. “Love the eyes, by the way. Sodramatic.”

I dropped my bag on the tarmac and hugged her. “At the end of this mission, you and I are going on holiday.”

“Sounds fabulous.”

“Excuse me,” Zeppelin muttered when he got to the bottom of the steps and found us in his way. He stalked over to the SUV, eyes riveted to his mobile, without as much as a glance at me or a goodbye to Angel.

“I never took him for the broody sort,” she said under her breath.

“He usually isn’t. In fact, he’s jovial to the point of being irritating.” Why was I defending him, and more, did I really know the man well enough to say he was one way or another?

“I wish you the best of luck, and stay alive, Ver.”

We cheek-kissed. “You do the same.”

I tossed my bag in the back of the SUV and closed the hatch. I was about to get into the empty front passenger seat when I heard a woman with a Swiss accent say, “You

can take the back.”

I glanced over my shoulder at the woman I immediately recognized as Schön. God, what was she doing here? “Of course. Apologies,” I muttered.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:38 am

Given Zeppelin was seated on the same side of the vehicle, I walked around it. The male driver got out and walked in the opposite direction. By the time I got in, after Reaper offered to move to the third-row bench, the woman was behind the wheel.

“I’m Schön, and this is Macht,” she said as she put the SUV in gear and peeled away from the aircraft.

I gripped the edge of the seat and glanced over at Zeppelin, who finally looked up from his mobile. His wide eyes trailed from my face down to my expanded bosom, then back up again.

“Our pre-op brief mentioned you’d be meeting us in St. Moritz and that a helicopter would transport us from here to there,” he said.

“The views from the road between Zurich and the resort where you’ll be staying are some of the most beautiful in the world.”

“Deliver us to the helipad,” Zeppelin responded in a way that came across as an order.

“Pardon?”

“We’ll travel via the prearranged transport.”

“But—”

“The helipad. Now,” he barked more than said.

“Since we’re transporting Reaper anyway, I thought we could review the op’s objectives on the drive.”

“There is no bloody way in hell I’m going to waste three hours riding in an SUV, sightseeing. I’ll schedule a briefing at the resort later this evening.”

“I’ll travel with you.” She turned to the agent she’d introduced as Macht. “You can meet us at the resort.”

“No.” Zeppelin’s tone was increasingly harsh. “I said we’d meet later.”

Since I was sitting behind her, I couldn’t see Schön’s reaction, but that she didn’t offer the customary, “Yes, sir,” indicated she was not used to having her plans circumvented.

The entire exchange relieved me. I’d anticipated Zeppelin might let the woman lead him around by the nose, as they say. I would go so far as to say I was pleased when he informed her she wouldn’t be traveling with us.

“Nice getup,” he said, taking me in from head to toe once we’d exited the vehicle and were walking to the waiting helicopter.

I nodded but didn’t speak. I hadn’t altered my appearance in order to garner compliments from Zeppelin. Concealing my identity when I was undercover was what would keep me alive when I transitioned from the coalition into Unit 23.

“You’re quiet,” he commented right before we climbed into the blade. “But then, you usually are.”

I laughed out loud.

He smiled. “What?”

“You are the last person I would expect to say I was quiet.”

“Apart from the times you’re annoying the hell out of me, you are.”

I chuckled when he smiled. “Back at you.”

When he scrubbed his face, I almost asked what was bothering him. But I refrained. The exchange thus far was crossing the threshold of a too-personal conversation. I had no intention of becoming friends with Zeppelin. None whatsoever.

4

ZEPPELIN

I knew better than to let my guard down with Verity. The moment I did, she’d throat punch me. Not literally, but oftentimes, that’s exactly how her insults felt.

No one had ever busted my balls the way she did. The worst part was, the majority of the time, she was right.

Maddening. That was the word she’d used when she scooted around me on the plane. The same one I’d repeated back to her. Except I knew the word had different meanings for each of us.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:38 am

For her, the widely accepted definition applied—vexing, infuriating, offensive. For me, longing for her fit better. Or mad with desire. Verity's pouty lips alone drove me to distraction.

While I'd done my level best to mask my reaction to her change in appearance, she'd stunned me. Her disguise was sexy as fuck, but I much preferred her earlier look, when we'd boarded the plane.

Sans makeup, she came across younger than her age. Then her hair had been loose, flowing over her shoulders. Now, it was pulled back in an austere bun in what might be intended to be off-putting but, instead, accentuated her high cheekbones.

I'd spent a good amount of time studying her in meetings when letting my gaze rest on her face appeared I was paying attention to what she was saying, rather than imagining how those lips would feel wrapped around my cock. Picturing exactly how she'd react if she could read my thoughts, I turned my head so she couldn't see my grin. When I looked back, she was glaring at me. I'd ask why, but wouldn't until we could speak privately rather than have the pilot listen in.

I thought about how her shoulders had been hunched on the drive to Gatwick when Mag and I were talking about Schön. It made me want to tell her that, yeah, the agent was hot, but that didn't mean she appealed to me enough for me to act on it during a mission. Or ever, really.

Verity, on the other hand, was someone I would've pursued—again, not during a mission—if it weren't so obvious she'd shut me down in a hot minute.

I rested my head against the seat and closed my eyes, relieved Schön hadn't found a way to cancel our air transport. An hour-long flight sure beat three hours on the road, and with the amount of work we had to do after we arrived in St. Moritz, every minute counted.

Other than the money moving from Mauritius to Switzerland, we didn't have many leads. Sure, we'd followed it here, but that didn't mean it hadn't come in via wire transfer. Instead, Nemesis had acted on a gut feeling that we'd learn something valuable during this deployment. As she was our commander, Verity and I were expected to follow orders, regardless of the concerns we'd brought up before leaving Shere.

While I doubted it would help us during this part of the op, by the time we arrived in St. Moritz, I anticipated we'd receive a post-op brief from Nem, addressing two significant events that happened within the coalition: Oleander's abduction and Seshat's defection—something that weighed heavily on everyone in the coalition.

There were two other matters of unfinished business niggling at me. First, right before Nemesis had made the announcement that she was sending Verity and me undercover, she informed those in the room that Z had resigned as chief of MI6. That in itself came as a surprise. Then, when she'd said no one knew where he was, I was stunned. I hoped that part of the mystery worked itself out by the time we landed.

The second unresolved issue involved a missing agent who was a member of the UK task force.

Sven "Puck" Lindstrom disappeared shortly after we'd lost two agents in a shootout on Gozo. At the time, Puck had been the task force's interim commander, and as was to be expected, he took the loss hard. It was believed he'd left Gozo with Cayman Trace, but several days later, we'd learned he hadn't. That was a year ago, and we hadn't established any leads in our search for him. For all we knew, Puck was dead.

No one had asked my opinion, but if they had, I would've said Seshat's defection and Puck's disappearance were somehow related.

The whole thing with the female agent plagued me. Collectively, we were the best intelligence agents in the world, and not one of us had suspected her. She and I hadn't had many interactions after we returned from the Gozo op, but in the time I'd spent with her on the island, she was professional and proficient. There were no red flags raised by anyone over her behavior.

It was widely known in our group that Seshat and Puck were mutually attracted to each other, but if he was still alive, I'd have a hard time believing he'd turn into a traitor like she had. The two agents he'd lost died at the hands of AMPS' soldiers. If anything, I'd say he'd infiltrated them, hoping to take them down single-handedly. However, he was a smart guy; he would have had to know that going in undercover with the coalition's backing would get him further faster.

When I felt Verity's tap on my arm, I turned my head to see her pointing out the window on the opposite side of the copter.

"Wow," I murmured at the panoramic view of the Swiss Alps, lit mainly by the moon's glow. It wasn't the first time I'd seen them from the air, but they never failed to take my breath away, even at night.

"Do you ski?" she asked.

"I do."

"Quite well, I'm sure."

"You don't?"

She shook her head. “No, I do.”

“Maybe that’s something we should do together.”

She shrugged. “Maybe.”

When she turned her head to look back at the mountains, I wondered how this would go between us. Would we be able to pull off looking like a couple crazy in love enough to have married?

The moment we arrived at the helipad in St. Moritz less than an hour later, both Verity and I checked our mobiles.

“Holy fucking hell,” I muttered under my breath before looking up at her. When I did, her expression of concern mirrored mine.

“Z is missing?” she mouthed.

According to the short brief, he was due to pick another agent—George—up from her flat at nineteen hundred hours for a dinner date. When he didn’t arrive on time, something very unlike Z, she contacted Pinch Fulton, DG of MI5 and also the interim chief in the wake of Z’s resignation.

“This says an all-call alert was issued at nineteen hundred,” Verity read once we were inside the terminal. “It says he was abducted.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:38 am

Since we were both whispering, I led her to an area where there were no other people.

“This is bad, Zep.”

I agreed and pulled out the mobile I’d stuffed in my pocket. “Let me see what I can find out.”

“Who are you calling?” she asked.

“Ares.”

“Hey, Zeppelin,” he answered.

“I’ve got Verity here with me. Any word on Z?”

“Not yet, but we’ll issue updates as we have them.”

Verity put her hand on my arm like she had in the copter. “Ask if we should return.”

I nodded, but Ares responded before I could repeat her question.

“Stay where you are. We’ve amassed a team, all hands on deck, as they say. You’re needed there, particularly if we discover this has anything to do with AMPS.”

“Copy that,” I said before ending the call.

We exited the building and approached the helipad’s valet. “I’m Jack Evans.” I was

about to give him the reservation number Nem had provided for the SUV she reserved for us, but he'd already raced off in the direction of the garage.

Both of us were quiet on the short drive to the resort.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Verity asked when I pulled up to the gatehouse of an unmarked compound.

"Is this Châteaux Relais?" I asked the attendant.

"Yes. Welcome. Are you checking in, sir?" the heavily accented man responded.

"Yes. Mr. and Mrs. Evans."

The man's eyes widened, but he quickly masked his reaction. "Excellent. Again, please let me offer you and your wife a very warm welcome."

I glanced over at Verity, who seemed equally confused by his effusive welcome.

The man directed us a short distance to the valet area. When I pulled up, four people descended on our vehicle, opening doors and getting our luggage from the rear of the SUV. Seconds later, a horse-drawn sleigh appeared.

"Sir, madam, welcome. I am Hans," said the man who'd opened Verity's door and extended a hand to help her out. "Bernard will deliver you to your chalet. In the meantime, we'll see to it your vehicle and luggage are there upon your arrival."

"It isn't any problem for me to drive it over myself."

Verity, who was now standing beside me, covered her mouth to stifle a laugh at Hans' reaction. He appeared aghast that I would suggest such a thing.

“Forgive me,” I said, tucking her arm in mine. “We’d love to take a sleigh ride. Wouldn’t we, darling?”

“It will be delightful.”

The man, who no longer appeared to be headed into a fit of apoplexy, led us both to where Bernard waited.

“Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Evans,” he said as he guided us into the sleigh. “May I offer you bothheisse Schoggi?”

“I’d love some. Thank you,” Verity responded.

He held up a flask and raised his brow in question.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:38 am

“Perhaps a dash each for the lady and me.” With the amount of work we had to do once we reached the chalet, neither of us could afford to get tattered. However, a little brandy added to our hot chocolate would fortify us on the ride.

“May I offer many congratulations on your recent marriage,” said Bernard, snapping the reins to get the horses moving.

Both Verity and I thanked him.

While it didn’t appear there was anyone other than Bernard in close proximity, I put my arm around her shoulders. “Warm enough?” I asked.

“Yes, thanks,” she murmured.

I leaned close so my mouth was near her ear. I would’ve much preferred to nuzzle her hair, perhaps trail kisses across her cheek until our lips met. “I’m practicing,” I whispered.

Her look of—what? discomfort?—unnerved me. However, I left my arm where it was. Once we arrived at the chalet, we’d need to talk. A new bride could hardly exhibit distaste for her groom when we were in public view.

“It’s so beautiful,” she said as we rode through trees of all sizes strung with multi-colored lights. It seemed early for the festive season’s decorations, but given guests were here on holiday, it made sense a resort of this size would be decked out by mid-November. The combination of illumination and ringing sleigh bells made it feel as though it could be Christmas Eve.

When Verity rested her head on my shoulder and I tightened my hold on her, an odd feeling of contentment washed over me.

“Is everything all right?” she asked, lifting her head.

“Yes. Fine. Perfectly fine.”

Verity raised a brow. “Sorry if I made you uncomfortable,” she whispered.

“Not at all.” I wasn’t lying. My discomfort had nothing to do with her head on my shoulder. It was about feelings so unexpected I didn’t know how to process them.

While she might use a word as strong as hate when referring to me, I wouldn’t. Infuriation? Yes. Did she drive me mad? Yes. In more ways than one.

“Here we are,” said Bernard, directing the horses to pull the sleigh close to a structure that was lit up as much as the trees that dotted our drive.

I could hear rushing water from a nearby stream, and the air smelled of a woodburning fireplace. When I looked up at the chimney, there was indeed smoke.

“Are you sure this is ours?” Verity asked, sitting up but hesitating to remove the blanket.

“Yes, ma’am. We had detailed instructions to have the place ready for your arrival. It appears the gents have brought your vehicle,” he said, pointing to the SUV, which was partially hidden in a denser section of trees. “You’ll find bottles of wine, compliments of Châteaux Relais, and dinner has been prearranged to be delivered promptly at eight.”

I jumped down and offered my hand to Verity. When she placed her palm in mine,

peacefulness washed over me. What in the bloody hell was going on? I'd been undercover with female agents before. Granted, it had never been as part of a married couple, particularly newly so.

“Shall we go inside?” she asked.

“Right. Of course.” I realized that, once she stood in front of me, I hadn't moved other than to study her. Clearly, Verity was not affected in the same way. If anything, she looked perplexed. I put her arm in mine and followed Bernard to the chalet's door.

“This is the best spot on the whole resort,” he said, sticking the key in the lock. “Maybe even in all of St. Moritz.”

The view in front of me when I walked in after Verity, was stunning. Softly falling snow could be seen through floor-to-ceiling windows on two of the exterior walls. In the corner where the walls met was a freestanding, woodburning fireplace. Candles—too many to count—were lit, providing enough illumination that turning on lights was unnecessary. In the opposite corner stood a decorated Christmas tree.

I walked through the kitchen, a sitting area, then over to stand near the windows. I raised my head and saw skylights had been installed into the roof as well.

The decor in the massive great room was either off-white or natural wood and done so well, it seemed to meld with what was outside.

The most striking thing in the room, though, was the bed. It was positioned in such a way that it faced the view, fireplace, tree, and candles. It looked quite large, bigger than a king.

Picturing Verity spread out on the lush blankets, her naked body awash with

candlelight, had my cock hardening to the point of discomfort. I adjusted my trousers and glanced over my shoulder, relieved to see neither she nor Bernard were paying attention.

I thought about Magnet's words before we left Shere when I'd asked what I should do. "Figure out how the hell you're gonna keep your hands off her," he'd responded.

At this rate, I wouldn't last a single night. Envisioning her belting me if I made a move had me chuckling. However, it did nothing to quell my desire for her.

"Jack, did you hear me?"

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:38 am

I turned slightly when I realized Verity was speaking to me using the alias assigned for the op. “Yes, love?”

“Bernard asked if we’d like him to open the wine.”

“We can do it a little later, perhaps?”

She nodded and raised a brow. I looked down and caught sight of her rubbing two fingers together.

“Right. Thanks, my good man,” I said, straining to reach into my pocket to pull out cash and wishing my, err, excitement wasn’t quite so obvious.

I managed to walk over and hand him a tip, but quickly turned my back to Verity once he’d thanked me.

“If there’s nothing else, I’ll take my leave.”

“That was rude,” Verity said after I heard the door close behind the man.

“Apologies, err, lost in thought.”

“You seem tongue-tied, Zep.”

Was it really necessary for her to use the word tongue? Or to swipe her lower lip with hers when I turned to face her?

“It appears this is the only room, other than the lavatory,” she commented.

“I can take the sofa,” I offered.

She flipped a switch, and powered blinds descended over the windows. “Bernard said that while we can see out, no one can see in, but if we feel uncomfortable, we can make use of these.”

“Right.”

“What’s going on, Zep? It didn’t appear Bernard put any more brandy in your hot cocoa than he did in mine, but your behavior is odd.”

I cleared my throat. “You should call me Jack, and I’ll refer to you as Elise for the duration of our time undercover.”

“Right,” she said like I had. I watched her remove her coat, place it on a peg near the door, then take her laptop from her satchel. “We should get to work.”

“Would you mind?” I asked, walking over to the switch she’d used to lower the blinds.

“Not at all. It’s a breathtaking view.” She sat at the table that created a division between the kitchen and sitting area. “Do you think Schön arranged for all this?”

I shook my head. “More likely, it was Nemesis.”

“She seems hellbent on making this as awkward as possible.”

“Where’s your ring?” I asked, noticing she wasn’t wearing it.

She pointed next to her computer. “It’s quite uncomfortable.”

“You still need to wear it.”

“Yes, sir.” Her sarcasm was accentuated by an eye roll.

“Verity—”

“Elise.”

“Right. Elise. You do recall we’re undercover in order to track human traffickers, yes?”

Her eyes widened. “Me?It’s you who seems to have drifted into an alternate universe. Wait.”

“Wait, what?”

“Is that why you’re acting so strange? Are you imagining this as a love nest for you and Schön?”

My eyes scrunched. Where in the bloody hell had that come from? “Something like that,” I muttered, winking after deciding it would be better for her to believe I was pining after Schön rather than admit to Verity how attracted I was to her.

The truth was, just the few minutes we were with the other agent had left me with a bad taste in my mouth. I had no doubt she was a decent intelligence officer, albeit an entitled one. It was just that, next to Verity, the woman felt...soulless.

When Nem eventually asked me about Schön joining my task force, I already knew I’d decline.

Verity got up and stood by the windows almost in the same spot I had earlier. Her arms were folded, and when I approached, she turned so her back faced me.

“Ver...”

She reached up with one hand as though she was brushing away a tear. “Apologies. I know this is terribly unprofessional. It’s just that Z...”

“You’re worried,” I commented. However, her reaction did seem a little overblown. “Um, was there something between the two of you?—”

She spun around on me. “Have you lost your bloody mind? Of course there was nothing between Z and me. God, you’re such an asshole.” She stalked away—not that there were many places to go other than the lavatory—which was precisely where she went, slamming the door behind her.

Moments later, there was a knock at the chalet’s entrance. I checked the time. Perhaps they were delivering dinner early, not that Verity or I would feel much like eating until we received an update about Z. I pulled the door open without looking, a testament to my distraction.

“Hello,” said Schön. “Is everything all right? You appear a little, err, frazzled.”

As much as I would’ve preferred not to, I motioned her inside. “Received a brief from the team with an update about an, um, op.”

She raised a hand. “Don’t worry, I understand you can’t tell me more than that.”

Whether she understood or not, I had no intention of divulging anything else.

When she took a step closer, I walked over to the window.

“Where’s the female agent?” she asked.

The female agent? I’d no doubt she knew her name. That she could be so condescending made me like her even less. “Come again?”

“Your, ahem, wife?”

“Oh, right. Taking a shower.”

Schön raised a brow. “I don’t hear water running.” She walked from near the lavatory

door over to where I stood, again too close for comfort.

“She’s just finished.” I’d no more than ended my sentence that we did hear water running.

“Is that so?”

I didn’t owe this woman an explanation and was getting irritated she seemed to think I did. “Look, this isn’t a good time.”

“Actually, I wanted to apologize for my misstep earlier. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

Before I realized what she was up to, her arms went around my neck and she leaned up as if she meant to kiss me. At the same time, the water went off and the bathroom door opened.

“Bloody hell,” I muttered when I heard the door slam a second time.

5

VERITY

“That fucking bastard,” I muttered to myself in the mirror. “Didn’t take him long.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

Every thought, every belief I'd had about him was dead-on. Barring any of the good ones. What an idiot I'd been to think we were forming a connection. Tentative friends even. I shook my head.

First, Zeppelin had insinuated I had a relationship with Z. That alone had been enough to make me want to slap him. The former MI6 chief was missing. The man who'd mentored me, encouraged me, told me I was good enough for Unit 23. He was like a father to me.

Then, after going into the lavatory to simmer down and have a good cry—not over Zeppelin—I came out to find Schön and him about to kiss.

I glanced over at the claw-foot tub. Given it was big enough for two, I wondered if I could sleep in it. With enough towels, I could fashion a pillow and blanket. If Zeppelin or his paramour needed to use the facilities, they could bloody well go outside.

If only I'd brought my laptop in with me. At least then I could get work done while Zeppelin and Schön did whatever they were about to do. The other thing I wanted to do was remove this bloody bra. The makeup and wig too.

I could hear voices. It sounded as though a man had arrived, but the voice wasn't familiar. "Right, dinner," I muttered, checking the time. A few minutes ago, I couldn't have imagined eating. Now, whatever had been delivered smelled so divine my stomach grumbled.

"Verity. Come out. Dinner is here."

“The two of you can eat without me,” I spat back.

“Schön is gone.”

Neither of us said anything for several seconds. Me, because I couldn't think of a single thing that wouldn't make me sound like a shrew. Him, because he was probably already enjoying his meal.

I nearly jumped when the door handle jiggled. Thank goodness I'd remembered to lock it. “Come on, Ver. What you saw, err, wasn't what it looked like.”

“Right,” I said under my breath.

“This is childish.”

“Sod off.”

“It isn't like we're really married, for God's sake.”

That was it. I grabbed the door and yanked it open. “Are you fucking kidding me? I can't believe you.” I was about to launch into a litany of things I couldn't stand about him, but stopped myself. “Nemesis is wrong. We cannot do this. I refuse to do this.”

I walked over to my laptop, which was moved by someone since the table where it had been now held our dinner. Our very romantic and tasty-looking dinner.

Zeppelin approached, and before I realized his intention, he removed my laptop from my hands.

“What do you think you're doing?” I shrieked.

“We’re going to have dinner. Then we’re going to talk.”

I shook my head. “I just said I cannot do this. I’m returning to England as soon as I can make the arrangements.”

“No, you’re not.”

“You’re out of your bloody mind. You don’t have the power to stop me.”

He set my laptop down but out of my reach. “You’re better than this, Verity. I cannot believe you’d let jealousy over something you misread interfere with a mission.”

When I raised my hand to slap him, he grabbed my wrist.

“Let me go, dammit.”

“No. Not until you and I talk this out.”

I tried to jerk out of his grasp, but he held on too tight. “Let go of me,” I demanded for the second time. “I’m not talking to you about anything.”

“No? All right, then.”

For a split second, I expected him to release me. Instead, he put his free hand on the back of my neck at the same time he brought his mouth to mine and kissed me.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

He fucking kissed me. Worse, I kissed him back.

His lips felt as soft as the snow falling outside the windows as his tongue coaxed my lips open. I don't know what I expected from him. Hard and fast? Demanding? Rough? This was none of those things.

He released my wrist and wrapped his arm around my waist. His other hand remained on my nape, as if he feared if he let go, I'd pull away from him. I wouldn't have.

I raised the same hand I'd intended to slap him with and weaved my fingers in his hair. It was softer than it looked. Almost silky.

I wondered if he made love the same way he kissed; the fleeting thought had me clenching my thighs. His hand slid down to my arse, and he cupped it, pulling my sex closer to his hardness. He pressed against me, and I whimpered.

With it, he broke the kiss and dropped his hands.

I took a step back, mortified, humiliated, and more embarrassed than I'd ever felt in my life. So I turned my back to him.

“Verity.”

“Don't,” I said. When he put his hand on my shoulder, I shrugged it off.

“Ver, look at me.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know what that was, but it can never happen again.” I walked around him, avoiding his gaze, and retrieved my computer.

“You aren’t leaving.”

I glared at him.

“At least hear me out.”

“It’s a wonder you can talk with how busy your mouth has been tonight.” God, that sounded stupid. Why had I said anything at all with my brain—and body—still reeling from that kiss? I sat on the sofa but didn’t open my computer.

“Will you listen?”

I nodded but looked out the window. Snow still fell, the candles flickered, and the wood in the fireplace crackled. This place was so beautiful. I hated the idea of leaving it so soon. When it growled, I pressed a hand against my stomach.

Zeppelin approached and held out his hand. “You can listen and eat at the same time.”

If I wasn’t so famished, I would’ve ignored him. Which, actually, was still an option. I got up without taking his hand, but I did take the seat when he pulled out one of the chairs.

The plate in front of me was empty, but there were four silver domes on the table. Zeppelin removed them one by one. “Beef tartare, spätzle—my personal favorite—and raclette.”

I reached over and grabbed a cornichon.

“I think this one is dessert,” he said, pointing to the final silver dome.

He went to get the two bottles of wine that had been delivered with our meal. One white, one red. “Do you fancy a Riesling or Pinot Noir?”

“Both, please.”

He smiled and looked for glasses. When he found four in the cupboard and poured us both a glass of each, I wanted to smile, to thank him, but I was still too shell-shocked from the kiss.

“Let’s start with Schön?—”

“What’s between you is none of my concern.”

Zeppelin sighed. “How can you say that after...” He looked down and shook his head. “Anyway, when I heard a knock, I assumed dinner was being delivered. I opened the door to find Schön instead. She swept past me before I could tell her it wasn’t a good time.”

I grabbed a second cornichon, took a sip of the Riesling, and coughed. Terrible idea. Off-dry wine coupled with the sour of the gherkin was horrid.

“Here,” Zep said, handing me a basket of bread.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

I took a slice, broke off a piece, and nearly groaned with how good it tasted.

“Better?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Back to Schön...”

I made a face similar to the one I had when the wine and brine met in my mouth.

“Shekissedme. And, actually, I stopped herbeforeit happened.”

“I don’t care.” I took a hefty sip of the Pinot Noir, then dished some of the beef tartare onto my plate.

“If you didn’t care, why did you hide in the lavatory for asecondtime?”

“I wasn’t hiding. It just so happens to be the only place I can get any privacy.”

“What about slamming the door?”

“It was an accident.” I spooned spätzle onto my plate.

“I’m not interested in Schön.”

“Like I said?—”

“I know. You don’t care. Except, what was that kiss?”

“You kissed me,” I said, repeating my thoughts from a moment ago, then took another bite of bread.

“You kissed back.”

“Severelapse in judgment. As I said, it can never happen again.” I leveled a glare at him. “Understood?”

“I’m sorry about suggesting there was something between you and Z. I know there wasn’t,” he said rather than respond to me.

“He mentored me.” I hated feeling as though I had to defend any relationship to him.

“It was stupid. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Per usual.”

He grinned, which made me want to either slap him or kiss him again. I couldn’t decide which.

“About Schön...” he began.

“Haven’t we covered that topic ad nauseam?”

He chuckled and dished some of each of the foods onto his plate. “Raclette?” he asked.

“Sure. Thanks.”

“I know you don’t care, but I have no interest whatsoever in Schön.”

“So you said.”

“More, don’t you find it bizarre that an agent would make a play for her soon-to-be commander hours after meeting him?”

“Doesn’t it happen to you all the time?”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

He raised a brow. “Of course it doesn’t. Come on, be serious for a minute.”

“For a minute,” I said, smirking.

His expression darkened. “Something felt off about her. Why would she suggest transporting you and me here from Zurich when Nemesis arranged for the helicopter?”

“Maybe she took one look at you and couldn’t resist.”

He rolled his eyes, then smirked like I had. “Do you speak from experience?”

“Hardly,” I snapped.

“She’s supposed to join the Swiss task force, for God’s sake. Although...”

“What?”

“Magnet did say some of her previous missions involved being a honey trap.”

I groaned.

“Whether accurate or not, her behavior made me uncomfortable to the point of wanting to ask to have her removed from the op.” His eyes met mine. “Just so you know, female agents don’t come on to me all the time, Ver. I’m here to do a job?—”

“Ah, you remember?”

He shook his head again. “You just love busting my balls, don’t you?”

I wrinkled my nose. “Such an American expression.”

“I spent a lot of time there.”

“That’s right. A lengthy stint with the CIA.” I dug into my food, and he did the same.

“I also did private security work for a brief while. With the same firm that employs Reaper, in fact.”

“Why’d you stop?” I asked.

“Honestly? It was boring.”

“So back you came to MI6.”

“Yeah. You know, I have a lot of respect for Z too.”

“I wonder if there’s been any update.”

He pushed his chair back. “I’ll take a look.”

“I can do it.”

He raised a brow when I took another bite of food rather than stand too.

“Sorry, haven’t eaten today,” I muttered.

Zeppelin nodded, then studied his mobile’s screen. “Nothing yet.” He lifted the final dome. “Ready for dessert?”

“Maybe in a bit.”

“Right. I’ll message Nemesis about Schön, then shall we get to work?”

I much preferred to work alone, whereas Zeppelin seemed the type to collaborate.
“I’m going to read through the AMPS briefs one more time, just to see if anything different pops out at me.”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

His eyes widened. “All of them?”

“Um, yes?” I wasn’t sure why I’d phrased it as a question.

“That will take a while.”

I couldn’t help but smirk. “Yes. You’re right.”

Zeppelin scowled. “I hate it when you do that,” I heard him mutter under his breath.

“Do what?”

“Talk to me like I’m an idiot.”

I folded my arms. “You do it to me.”

He walked over to the fireplace, pushed the logs around, then added two more.

“Come here,” he said, motioning me to join him by the window.

“What is it?” I asked, looking in the same direction.

“Under that tree,” he said, pointing.

I scrunched my eyes, and while I could see something, I had no idea what it was.

“Two black foxes. They’re quite rare, you know?”

“I didn’t.”

“Have you ever heard them scream?”

I cocked my head. “Scream?”

“They sound like humans. Little girls, actually.”

“They scream?”

“It’s their mating call.” He pulled out his mobile, swiped the screen, and tapped it. A few moments later, a video popped up. He held it so I could get a better view. In it, a lone fox wandered back and forth near a trail camera. When it suddenly screamed and it did sound like a little girl, as Zeppelin had said, I giggled.

“Odd that it works for a mating call,” I commented.

He shrugged. “Right. With humans, it typically happens during, um, mating.”

That was a mental picture I didn’t need to see. Particularly since the image in my mind was of Zeppelin and me on the very bed we stood beside. He was pleasuring me with his mouth, making me scream in ecstasy.

“I need to get to work.” I spun around and stalked away.

“Come on, you can’t be that much of a prude.”

I looked back at him. “Did you just call me a prude?”

He raised a brow. “You did get angry when I said women are more apt to scream during mating.”

“You said humans, and I didn’t get angry. I just don’t have time to stand around, gazing out the window. I have work to do.”

“There’s the Verity I recognize,” he mumbled.

“Elise, remember?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

Zeppelin shook his head. “When you show me a glimpse of the woman beneath the hard shell you keep around you, then you’re Elise. When you’re a bitch, then you’re Verity.”

I thought about calling Nemesis and informing her that not only was I leaving this op, but I intended to ask Typhon to assign me to a Unit 23 mission. Or I considered slapping Zeppelin, which I would’ve done if he were closer. Instead, I took a seat in one of the stuffed chairs positioned near the sofa and opened the first brief on AMPS. It was one I’d prepared myself after a discussion with Oleander. While it would’ve been logical for the woman to do it herself, O didn’t write briefs.

That wasn’t all she didn’t do. Hotel or dinner reservations, car rentals, and paperwork of any kind were typically left to me, at least on the missions we’d worked together. She’d apologized once for treating me as if I were her assistant. I truthfully told her it didn’t bother me. The woman was as brilliant as she was badass. We all had things we didn’t like to do. Maybe by helping her, someone might pay it forward and take on the things I didn’t care for on my behalf—like going undercover with Zeppelin on future ops.

“Have you noticed the size of this bed?” he asked, seemingly forgetting he’d just insulted me. “I think it’s the biggest I’ve ever seen. It could easily fit three people.”

I glanced over and saw he was studying it. Good God, was he really imagining three people in it? Knowing him, he was likely fantasizing about himself with two of the supermodel types he seemed to like so well. I scrunched my eyes closed, attempting to unsee one of the women being Schön.

“If we reviewed the briefs together, we could brainstorm.”

I closed my laptop and looked up at him. “You can read, Zeppelin? Yes?”

“Jack, remember, Verity?”

I tried to come up with a witty yet biting reply, but when nothing came to mind, I reopened my computer. “All right, then. Let’s get to it.”

Zeppelin sat in the one other chair and opened his laptop as well. “Go ahead.”

I raised a brow, but considering he had his fingers on the keyboard, I’d give him the benefit of the doubt and assume he intended to take notes.

“The first mention of AMPS was a year ago when Nemesis held a briefing about the IP origin of a sex-slave auction,” I began.

“Right. It was the shell corp that owned Mithras’ villa.”

“Registered in Mauritius,” I added.

“It was also the first time Pharaoh’s name was mentioned and when you discovered the offshore accounts were also in Mauritian banks.”

“We then theorized the acronym represented aliases or code names, if you will. M for Mithras. P for Pharaoh. Do you have a theory as to who A and S might be?”

Zeppelin shook his head. “None. You?”

“Me neither.”

He looked over at the table. “If I’m going to remain alert, meaning awake, I need something more to eat.” He stood and lifted the remaining silver dome.

When I saw a small chocolate cake beneath it, I was all in. “Shall I make us each an espresso?” I asked, walking over to the machine that sat on the kitchen counter.

“I’d love one. Actually, make it a double-shot.”

If I were to consume that much caffeine coupled with chocolate, I might not sleep until tomorrow night. In fact, the chocolate alone would get me wired. “On second thought, I’ll pass. I’ll still make coffee for you, though.”

He raised a brow. “You’re not tired? I can barely keep my eyes open.”

“Given the late hour, I’ll be more effective if I sleep now and start fresh in the morning.”

He looked at the dessert, then at me again.

“Are you pouting?” I asked, chuckling.

“So, not even any cake?”

“None for me, but you go ahead.” The look on his face when he replaced the dome reminded me of a child who’d just been told they couldn’t have something they wanted. “Seriously, you don’t have to refrain just because I am.”

“You’re right. We should try to sleep now and start fresh in the morning.”

When he walked over to the bed and pulled back the blankets on one side, I wondered if he’d forgotten he offered to take the sofa. No matter. I would tonight, and we could

switch off. I grabbed a pillow from the opposite side and one of the blankets.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’ll let you have the bed tonight.”

“As large as it is, I think we can share.”

“Zeppelin—”

“Jack, remember?”

“Jack, I don’t think sleeping together is a good idea. I mean, in the same bed, not that we’d besleeping together.” I sighed. “You know what I mean.”

“We could put pillows down the middle if it would make you feel more comfortable.” He held up one hand. “And I promise not to cross the boundary into Elise-land.”

I shook my head and chuckled like I had a few times since we arrived at the chalet. “You’re funny.”

He cocked his head. “I can’t tell if you’re being sarcastic or if it means you won’t sleep here.”

Given the sofa had felt uncomfortable when I sat on it, I figured there’d be no harm in sharing the bed. “All right.” I returned the pillow and blanket to their original place.

After glancing at the look on his face, I momentarily reconsidered. He appeared a little too happy about my decision.

ZEPPELIN

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. While Verity came out of the bathroom dressed in the least sexy sleepwear I'd ever seen, she smelled fantastic. Since she was rubbing her hands together, I assumed it was her lotion, but wow, the pheromones!

"I'll, um, just have a shower before bed."

Verity gave me a blank look before climbing into her side and nestling under the covers. God, I wanted to join her, without a wall of pillows separating us.

On my way to the lavatory, I contemplated whether I should have a hot or cold shower. Maybe if I just took the edge off myself, I wouldn't have such a hard time lying next to Verity in the most romantic setting imaginable.

I closed the door behind me and noticed there was no shower, only a claw-foot tub. A cold bath wouldn't do. I'd be an icicle by the time I got out.

Like the bed, it was oversized. Maybe not big enough for three, but definitely for two. I immediately pictured Verity and me, both naked, her slick body writhing against mine as I pleased her with my fingers.

Earlier, I'd said I'd call her Elise when she was the slightest bit agreeable, but Verity when she was a bitch. Maybe that had been harsh. Either way, I thought about what I would call her when we made love. The thought jarred me. When, I told myself, not if.

Alena. That's what I'd call her when she was naked and beneath me, my cock buried deep in her pussy.

Not to brag, but I was fairly well-endowed. More than one of the women I'd had sex with said as much. I stroked my cock's length before getting in the water, imagining the sounds Alena would make when I first entered her or when I'd make her come using my mouth and fingers. Would she scream out my name when I pushed her over the edge? Or would she mewl and moan?

Based on our kiss alone, it was obvious we'd be compatible sexually. She'd met me mouth-fuck for mouth-fuck—her tongue doing battle with mine—yet when I gentled, she did too. I couldn't remember a single kiss I'd shared with anyone being as satisfying as the one with her. It had been brilliant.

I also thought about Condor's words on the plane after she'd taken a seat all the way in the back. When he'd said, "I tapped that," I wanted to punch him hard enough he'd see stars. But had he, or was he a typical guy, bragging about something that had only taken place in his fantasies? Whether he and Verity had had sex or not, which I very much doubted, his speaking about her that way had my blood boiling. Misogynistic asshole.

Thankfully, he and Angel had been called back to England and I wasn't forced to endure them traveling to St. Moritz with us and watching him ogle Verity.

Picturing them together was the bucket of cold water I needed. I was ready to towel off, march out to where she lay in bed, and tell her what he'd said, like a boy tattling on one of his mates. Except Condor wasn't a friend. The odds were far greater we never would be now.

I got out after washing myself, dried off, then pulled on the flannels I'd brought in with me. I hadn't grabbed a shirt of any kind. It was surprising enough I'd remembered something to cover the lower half of my body.

While brushing my teeth, I thought about the day on Gozo when I was shedding my

tactical gear and had pulled the T-shirt I wore beneath it off too.

When I'd glanced over at Verity, I caught her checking me out. At the time, I'd smirked even though her eyes taking me in had excited me almost as much as our kiss had.

"Bloody hell," I muttered under my breath. I was rock hard again. There was no way I could leave the bathroom now. Verity would probably make good on her threat to call Nemesis and demand to be removed from the op if she saw the boner I sported.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

After resting my arse on the edge of the tub for several minutes with no change, I decided to attempt getting in bed without her seeing my body's reaction to fantasizing about her. While it would be odd, I could always wad a towel up and carry it in front of me.

I tiptoed from the bathroom, and when I got close to the bed, I saw she was asleep. I climbed under the blankets but didn't lie down right away. Instead, I studied her.

She looked like the woman I'd boarded the plane with in Gatwick again. The heavy makeup she wore had been washed off, and her long brown hair was spread out on the pillow. The idea she'd be sleeping within arm's reach had my pulse accelerating. She was one of the most attractive women I'd ever seen. And I'd seen plenty.

I propped my head on my hand and continued my perusal. Thick blankets covered her body to her neck, but my imagination was good enough that I could picture her naked breasts. I knew her nipples would be dusty rose, hardened likethey were after our kiss. And what about her pussy? Would downy hair cover her, or wasAlenathe type who kept herself bare?

I reached beneath the blankets and squeezed my cock through my flannels. I was right back where I'd been in the lavatory—hard enough that if she woke and somehow noticed, this op would be over before it started.

As if she'd heard me thinking as she slept, her big brown eyes sprung open.

“Hey,” I whispered, not knowing what else to say since she'd caught me staring at her.

“Hey. Is everything all right?”

“Yeah. You caught me looking.”

While she smiled, I could tell she wished she hadn't.

“Are you going to ask if I like what I see?”

She moved her head back and forth and giggled. “No way. I don't think my fragile ego can take it.”

“Ha! As if your ego is even a tiny bit fragile. I do, by the way.”

“Zeppelin...” There was an edge of warning in her tone.

“You have to admit that kiss was something special.”

Verity propped herself up on her elbows. “Fishing for compliments?”

I'd rather fish for a second kiss, but I kept it to myself.

“You're shirtless.”

“I am?” I looked down at my bare chest as if it were a surprise.

Her eyes trailed from my face to where the blanket covered the lower half of me.

“My turn. Do you like what you see?”

“You know you're hot, Zep.”

“That sounds like something you should say to Jack.”

“That might be entering the danger zone.”

I cocked my head. “What does that mean?”

“Well, Jack and Elise are in love and on their honeymoon. Zep and Verity can hardly stand the sight of each other.”

“I can stand the sight just fine.”

She smiled again. “Zep and Verity can barely tolerate each other. Better?”

“Not better, but accurate. Why do you suppose that is?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “We’re both control freaks?”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

I opened my mouth in feigned shock. “I am not a control freak.”

She giggled. “You’re more of one than I am.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“You can ask,” she responded.

“Why Unit 23?”

She dropped her elbows and rested her head on the pillow. “Wow,” she gasped.

I followed her line of sight to the skylight above us. “Spectacular, right?”

“It’s breathtaking.”

I wanted to tell her she was what took my breath away, but I was already treading on thin ice, as they say.

“In answer to your question, morbid as it sounds, assassination has always fascinated me.”

I laughed out loud. It was the last thing I’d expected her to say.

“Z is the one who encouraged me to pursue working for the unit.” She propped herself up again. “About Z, have we received any updates?”

I reached for my mobile to check. “Nothing on him, although there are a couple of things about Seshat.”

“Like what?”

“Were you aware she was born in America?”

Her eyes scrunched. “That’s impossible.”

“Wren is saying her birth record is sealed, but the presumption is her father was from the UK since she’s a citizen by birth.”

“Sealed? How odd.”

“They’re trying to get the certificate released now.”

She lowered herself to the pillow a second time. “We should sleep.”

“We should.” While my words indicated agreement, my body wanted none of it. “Maybe just one good-night kiss first?”

I expected a terse retort or even that she’d laugh. She did neither. Her eyes bored into mine. “Maybe just one.”

7

VERITY

Had I really just agreed we should kiss? Was I out of my bloody mind?

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Sure?”

“Based on your expression, I’d say the last thing you want to do is kiss me.”

“It’s just...it isn’t a good idea, Zeppelin. You must agree.”

“I suppose I do.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“We’ve no way of knowing how long we’ll be undercover in Switzerland.”

“And?” he prompted.

“I wasn’t going to say anything more.”

“I’ll say it. If this goes south, like many things between you and me seem to, you don’t want it to be more awkward than it already is.”

“Precisely.”

“On the other hand, what if this is the start of things going north for us?”

“Is that an expression? Going north?” I asked.

Zeppelin shrugged. “It is now.”

“I’m not certain kissing, even good night, is a great idea.”

“I do.” He leaned forward, but rather than kissing my mouth, his lips landed on my forehead. “Good night, Elise.”

“Good night, Jack.”

When I woke the following morning, Zeppelin was still asleep. Rather than risk waking him by heating water for tea, I grabbed my laptop and continued reading from where I’d left off. It was imperative I get my head back into this investigation

straightaway. I'd chalk last night up to neither of us thinking clearly. Or thinking at all.

I looked out the window. It was just dawn, and the snow had stopped, but the view remained breathtaking.

Moments later, both our mobiles pinged. I grabbed mine and read the alert. Nemesis sent several updates, but none stating they'd located Z. What she did say was that Decker Ashford, Quint Alexander—Z's son—and Quint's wife, Darrow, had arrived.

She also reported that Poseidon and Oleander were on their way back from the States after learning the trafficking suspect they were to question, Manual Varilla, had been found dead in his cell the morning they were scheduled to arrive. It was an apparent suicide by hanging. Given the agents intended to ask him about AMPS, I couldn't help but wonder if he'd been murdered instead.

While learning of Varilla's death was disconcerting, her next bit of news had me stunned.

“What in the bloody fucking hell?” exclaimed Zep, jumping up from the bed. “Iris Beachum says she has information that would help locate Z, but she has demands that need to be met before she'll share it?”

“Apparently,” I said, still disbelieving what I'd read, even after Zeppelin expressed similar anger over it.

“If I was there instead of here, the woman would be in a major world of hurt,” he added.

“Same.” I didn't know much about Iris other than what I'd read in her background check and in briefs where she was mentioned. Comments I'd overheard were rarely

positive. In fact, I knew very few people in all of SIS who liked the woman. “Puck!” I gasped.

Zeppelin, in all his shirtless glory, approached. “What about him?”

“He’s the only person I’ve ever heard say something nice about Iris. In fact, I’ve heard him defend her.”

He sat beside me on the sofa, leaned forward, and put his head in his hands. “Puck has Z.”

It was a logical theory. However, that Iris had said she had information that would help locate the former chief didn’t necessarily mean it was Puck who’d abducted him.

On the other hand, Zeppelin wasn’t typically quick to judge or hypothesize. He took in the information and processed it. Many times, I’d watched him from the corner of my eye, knowing the exact moment he pieced a clue together. He had the same look on his face now.

“What makes you so certain?” I asked.

“Puck’s off the rails.” He looked in the direction of the kitchen, then at me. “Want an espresso?”

“I was thinking tea.”

We stood at the same time, and I plugged the electric kettle in while Zeppelin fiddled with the coffee machine.

“Can I help?” I asked. “I have the same machine.”

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“If you wouldn’t mind. I need an espresso in order to be awake enough to figure out how to make it.”

I smiled. “It’s quite easy, really.” I turned it on. “See? Just press the button.”

“Seriously? That’s it?”

“Well, put a cup under the nozzle.”

He glanced over his shoulder. “You’re a little minx, aren’t you?” He took a deep breath. “Who smells so bloody good I could eat you up.”

My cheeks flamed at the same time the kettle chirped.

“I didn’t mean, you know,that.”

I poured cream into my tea, stirred it, then returned to the sofa. “Tell me more about why you believe Puck has Z.”

Zeppelin joined with his espresso. Part of me wished he’d put on a shirt. The other part of me enjoyed ogling his muscles.

“You really have a machine just like that one?”

“Exactly like it.”

“I’m impressed.”

“It doesn’t take great skill to order something online, Zep.”

“Jack. And I need another one of these.”

“Zep, Jack, whatever your name is, will you please tell me what made you say Puck has Z?” I hollered after him when he returned to the kitchen.

“Hang on. As you know, this only takes a minute.”

“Argh!” I fell against the sofa and brought my hands to my head.

“Okay, okay. Calm down. I’ll just put on a shirt and...”

I moved my hand and opened one eye when he didn’t finish his sentence. “And what?”

“I should’ve said unless...”

“Whatever you’re about to suggest, my answer is a resounding no. My God, how do you ever get any work done?”

“It’s quality, not quantity. I focus on what’s important more than?—”

I didn’t interrupt; he stopped mid-sentence. “More than what? Were you about to say I don’t focus on what’s important?”

“No...” He drew the word out to two syllables.

“You’re a liar. That’s exactly what you intended to say.” I picked up my laptop and stormed over to the bed. “The deal is off. We’ll both work on our own.”

“Why do you get the bed?”

I groaned again and got up. “You take it. I don’t care where I sit.” I plopped on the sofa. “You are maddening,” I muttered.

“Right back at you.”

I peeked over and saw him pull a shirt over his head, then returned to the brief on my screen.

“When we left off last night, I said that after locating the IP address for the scheduled auction website at the villa owned by AMPS, we theorized the acronym represented code names. M for Mithras. P for Pharaoh,” he began.

“I said it.”

He looked up. “What?”

“You didn’t say it; I did.”

He rolled his eyes. “All right. You said it. What was next in the brief?”

“Read it for yourself.”

Rather than do so, he sat beside me. “I told you I do better with collaboration.”

“And I told you I prefer to work alone.”

“My op.”

“What?”

“I’m the Swiss task force commander. I own the op. I decide how we approach the investigation.”

My eyes scrunched. “You cannot be serious.”

He didn’t respond.

If we weren’t undercover as newlyweds, I’d find somewhere else to work. I supposed it wouldn’t do if I requested Nem booka second room—or chalet—for me. The resort

staff—and Schön—would certainly notice.

“Are you thinking about leaving again?” His icy blue eyes were round, and his lower lip stuck out. Like a child’s.

“Zeppelin, I’m imploring you. Let me read through these briefs. I won’t have time tomorrow, and I really want to refresh my memory.”

“Why won’t you have time tomorrow?”

“We have meetings at the banks where the funds were moved, remember?”

“Right. Wait. Tomorrow is Sunday.”

I shook my head. “Apparently, along with everything else I’ve done indicating I’ve lost my mind, now I’ve lost track of what day it is. However, I do think we should go out for a bit. There’s no sense in us being undercover in St. Moritz if all we’re going to do is hole up in this chalet and visit banks in two days.”

“We could ski.”

I slammed my computer closed. “Argh. Yes, that’s what we should do. Ski.” I got up and returned to the bed since he wasn’t making use of it.

No more than five minutes passed before he sat beside me. “If I promise to be a good boy, will you please work with me?”

“Is that usually effective? You pout, give a woman puppy-dog eyes, and she does your bidding?”

“Almost always.” He plumped his pillow, lay down, and propped his computer on his

knees. “Okay, I’m ready.”

Accepting he’d continue his intransigence regardless of how many times I said I preferred to work alone, I gave in. “We identified the M in AMPS was for Mithras and the P for Pharaoh. Wait! You were supposed to tell me why you think Puck abducted Z.”

He nodded but didn’t sit up. “As I said, Puck is off the rails. First, he lost two agents on their first international op. Second, he was besotted with Seshat, who’s now dead. The very next day, Z goes missing.”

“And?”

“Puck likely doesn’t believe Seshat was killed. He’ll want Z to take him to her.”

I shook my head. More like rattled it. “That’s what’s behind your theory? We all know she’s dead.”

Our mobiles pinged simultaneously.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“See?” he said, looking at his mobile. “I told you.”

“Hang on. I haven’t finished reading the alert.”

According to Nem’s latest report, Decker Ashford was able to obtain a copy of Seshat’s birth certificate. There was a time stamp recorded, which indicated more than one baby was delivered. I looked up at Zep. “Were you aware of that? I wasn’t.”

“Which part?”

“The time stamp.”

He nodded. “If you mean did I know about it in relation to Seshat, obviously, I didn’t. What I did know is its presence meant more than one baby.”

I kept reading. “Oh my God.”

“You got to the good part.”

I was stunned. “The body in the morgue isn’t Seshat?”

“The working theory is it was made to look like the second child died.”

“Right. I wonder when the, err, switch was made. Also, this doesn’t mean Seshat is alive. Her twin, if that’s who she was, most likely killed her.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if the switch, as you called it, coincided with when Puck

went missing.”

“Are you thinking that, twenty-five years ago, whoever took the second baby somehow knew that, eventually, she’d have to infiltrate a UN coalition, kidnap, and kill an agent?”

He thought it over for a few seconds. “Yes.”

“Come on. That’s preposterous.”

He turned to face me. “Is it? You’ve read the brief from Oleander’s interview with Nemesis and Poseidon. Before he was killed, O’s father was investigating a man he believed was a human trafficker who we now know was Mithras’ and Pharaoh’s father.”

I stared at him.

“What?” he asked.

“I didn’t receive that brief.”

“Of course you did. It came over at zero three hundred.”

I checked, and he was right. I had no idea how I’d overlooked it. “When did you read it? I was awake before you were.”

He shook his head. “I reviewed it when it came in, then went back to sleep.”

I opened the file and began reading. It started with Oleander’s abduction, the details of which I already knew. I skimmed ahead to the part about her father. According to the brief, before dying in a plane crash O believed wasn’t an accident, he’d been with

SAS, the precursor to Unit 23. Prior to that, he'd been investigating a man named Salvatore Rávdos, code name Cronos.

During Oleander's captivity, Pharaoh said O's father had ruined her father's life—meaning Rávdos. She'd also accused O of killing her brother.

Now, I understood why Zep had said we knew Rávdos was Pharaoh's and Mithras' father. So, how did this relate to the unknown body in the morgue?

“Are you suggesting Rávdos was also Seshat's and this other woman's father?”

He shrugged. “Makes sense.”

The last thing it did was “make sense.” It was about as far-fetched as I could imagine, which, in turn, probably meant Zeppelin's theory was dead-on. Or at least close.

“Nothing on Z, though. Fucking Iris,” he muttered.

“He's been missing for fifteen hours.”

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

Zeppelin nodded. “They’ll find him.” He reached up and brushed away a tear I hadn’t realized had fallen.

“Sorry. Sounprofessional.” I scooted off the bed and picked up a box of tissues I’d seen on a table in the sitting area. I pulled two out and blew my nose.

“Don’t apologize, Verity. It’s nice to know you’re human.” He winked, and I smiled.

“Back to AMPS?” I asked.

“Whenever you’re ready.”

I was about to say I’d been ready for over an hour, but thought better of it. Everything between us didn’t have to be an argument.

We reviewed the notes, starting with our deployment in what Nemesis had named “Operation Rescue Bexli.”

Bexli Everdeen was a childhood friend of Cayman Trace, who was the UK task force commander at the time. His close connection to the victim was the reason Z had suggested Puck serve as interim commander.

In that op, twenty women were liberated from Mithras’ villa on the island of Gozo, all of whom had appeared on the sex-slave auction’s website on the dark web.

Bexli, who was now Cayman’s wife, had escaped the villa prior to our raid but was located two days later. She’d been taken in by a woman named Francesca Vella, aka

Nonna, after she found Bexli hiding in the alley behind her restaurant.

Coincidentally, Francesca's daughter, a nurse hired to administer the drugs the captive women were given, had been working at the villa the night Bexli escaped. At one point, it was suggested Charlene Vella-Borg had aided Bexli in getting out. However, it remained unclear whether that had been the case.

The other person living with Francesca when they harbored Bexli in the apartment above their restaurant was her grandson, Xavier.

"This is where I get confused," Zep said.

"About Xavier?"

"Yes. We know he worked at the US Embassy on the main island of Malta. Why was he on Gozo, then?"

"He was searching for his girlfriend, who was missing," I reminded him.

"Right. Moving on, after Cayman and three other agents found Bexli, Xavier, his aunt, and grandmother were granted exile at the embassy by the ambassador."

I nodded. "But then, somehow, Mithras abducted Francesca and returned with her to his villa on Gozo, where he held her hostage. But Charlene and Xavier weren't aware she was missing?"

"Allegedly, not right away," Zep confirmed.

"Then Xavier showed up on Gozo, somewhat miraculously, shot and killed Mithras, and saved his grandmother's life."

Zep nodded. “At the same time, twenty-plus agents and operatives were also on the scene, about to rescue Francesca themselves but with the intent of keeping Mithras alive for questioning.”

“Why did Xavier kill him? He saw us there and had to have at least guessed our plan. It doesn’t make sense.”

Zeppelin stood and walked over to the window. “Why did Xavier kill Mithras?” A minute later, he returned to the bed. “There was something he didn’t want us to find out.”

“Good Lord, do you think Xavier was somehow in on the auction? Or had a connection to Mithras?”

Zeppelin’s eyes scrunched. “Given he, Charlene, Francesca, and Xavier’s girlfriend, Selene, who had also been kidnapped by Mithras, are currently residing in a secure location on Mallorca, I sure as bloody hell hope not.”

Nemesis had made arrangements for the four to stay on a compound owned by a former MI6 agent. Cortez “Rile” DeLéon was also the founding partner of a private security and intelligence firm that called themselves the Invincibles. Not only that, he was the nephew of the King of Spain. The location was definitely secure; however, not if the enemy were within.

“Selene was severely beaten hours before being liberated from the villa. Maybe that’s why Xavier killed Mithras. Revenge for what he did to his girlfriend,” I suggested.

Zeppelin was thoughtful for several seconds.

“By the way, did Nemesis respond to your concerns about Schön?”

“I forgot to tell you I decided against sending the message. I’ll do it after Z is found.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“Makes sense.” Was that what was on his mind, or was it something else? “All right. Out with it.”

His forehead furrowed. “Pardon?”

“What’s bothering you? I mean, besides having to be undercover with me.”

“That doesn’t bother me.”

I raised a brow and folded my arms.

“It doesn’t.”

“What is it, then?”

“Xavier Vella. My gut is telling me he didn’t kill Mithras out of revenge for what he did to his girlfriend. I’d bet anything there was something Mithras knew that Xavier didn’t want us finding out.”

“Perhaps we should share this theory with the team.”

“I’m thinking that, instead of being in St. Moritz, we should’ve gone to Mallorca.”

“I think you might be right.”

ZEPPELIN

It was all I could do to stop staring at Verity. Her hair was disheveled, her cheeks pink, and every time she bit her bottom lip, I wanted to lean in and lick it. Sitting on the bed with her looking like she was, felt almost postcoital. Working with her day in, day out in this manner would be the biggest test of restraint I'd faced in my life.

"This seems like a good time to take a break," she said, closing her laptop.

"Are you sure? We still need to talk about Oleander's abduction."

She nodded. "I want to shower first."

"There's no shower."

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, Zeppelin. What I meant is I want to bathe first."

"Right," I muttered, doing my damndest not to picture her naked in the oversized tub. If I were feeling more like myself, I'd joke about us taking one together, but it would come out wrong, and Verity would be offended, again threatening to leave the mission. But why shouldn't I be myself? Was my restraint more indicative of my desire for her than if I was as much of a jokester as I normally was? "We could conserve hot water."

Verity made a face. "Ew. You want to use my dirty bath water?"

This time, I rolled my eyes. "I was facetiously suggesting we bathe together, Verity." I emphasized the code name.

She shook her head. "No, thanks."

I laughed out loud.

“What?”

“I expected you to be horrified.”

She put a hand on her hip. “Is that what you were hoping would happen?”

I shook my head. “I’m a wanker.”

She smiled and spun on her heel, then looked over her shoulder. “You’ve got that right,” she said with a wink.

While I made myself another espresso, I thought about how far my opinion of the woman had swung in the last twenty-four hours. I actually liked Verity. Yeah, there were times she could be bitchy, but as I’d just said, I could be a wanker. That she gave it right back to me turned me on as much as imagining her naked in the tub did.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

The thought shamed me. I shouldn't look at her only as a woman I found attractive. I should appreciate her exemplary work, admire her brilliance, and as with other agents she and I worked with, attempt to establish a friendship rather than a dalliance.

I walked outside and set five camera mics around the chalet. They were small enough that no one would notice them and had scramblers embedded so if anyone did a sweep for listening devices, they wouldn't show up.

After returning inside, I took a sip of my now-cold espresso, then set the cup down, vowing to stop flirting with Verity and be more professional.

Tires screeched in my head. Except we were undercover as a newly married couple. How in the hell would I be able to curb my flirtation if I had to keep turning it on and off like a light switch?

“You appear to be in an argument with yourself.”

I hadn't heard her come out of the bathroom. She stood before me, hair wet, in jeans and a pullover that accentuated her curves. Without makeup, she looked to be about twenty-one and so damned beautiful.

She smoothed her hair with one hand. “Do I have something on my face?” she asked when I didn't avert my eyes.

“I'm going to say something to you, and I want you to know in advance it's a compliment I mean in a purely non-flirtatious way.”

“How disappointing.”

I smiled and shook my head. “There you go, busting my balls again.”

“Apologies. What were you going to say?”

“You’re very beautiful, Verity, and your brilliance enhances it.”

Her cheeks flushed, but the smile left her face. “Thank you.”

“It’s hard for you to accept compliments.”

Her eyes met mine, and she raised her chin. “I don’t get many of them.”

“You should.”

“So, um, shall we get back to work?”

“I’llbathenow, then catch up.”

Her smile was back, and damn, if she wasn’t even more gorgeous.

I grabbed some clothes and was on my way into the bathroom when something occurred to me. “Last night, we said we’d arrange for the team to meet. It completely slipped my mind.”

“Would you like me to arrange it?”

“Yes, but have Schön arrive first.”

Verity nodded. “You want to get another read on her.”

“More, I want you to.”

“I’ll make contact,” she offered.

“Excellent idea.”

Once finished with my bath, I grabbed my laptop and joined her at the table. Verity looked up at me. And by up, I mean, her gaze was focused on my hair. As she did, I ran my hand over it.

“I like it better slicked back, the way you have it now,” she commented.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She returned her attention to her computer.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

While I was in the bathroom, Verity had transformed back into the heavily made-up blonde with blue eyes and exceedingly large breasts. “I like the natural color of your hair and eyes better,” I commented.

“The way you comb your hair is a matter of style. My disguise is a matter of staying alive,” she muttered without looking up at me. “By the way, I started a brief with our thoughts about Xavier Vella. Shall I send it to you to finish?”

“I’ll read what you have so far if you’d like.”

“Sure, I’ll?—”

Before she could finish, her mobile pinged. I checked mine, but I hadn’t received a message.

“Schön will be here at fourteen hundred. Macht and Reaper will arrive thirty minutes later.”

“Less than an hour from now. I’m not sure how deep I want to dive into any of this in her presence,” I commented. “I’m convinced she won’t be a good fit for the Swiss task force.”

“Then, we shouldn’t discuss it at all.”

I rubbed my hands together. “Right. Then, let’s see how much we can cover before she arrives. To review, Salvatore Rávdos—Cronos—was a key player in human trafficking back at the turn of the century. Maybe longer ago than that. Oleander

believes he had something to do with the plane crash that took both her parents' lives."

"Based on O's recounting of the conversation between her and Pharaoh, Cronos was her father. We also know Mithras was Pharaoh's brother," she added.

"There's something about her accusing Oleander of killing him that's niggling at me. I'd say we all agree Mithras had the majority of Gozo's law enforcement working for him. Thus, I have a hard time believing no one informed her Xavier Vella was the one who killed him."

"I was curious about the same thing. Feared retaliation for Mithras' death is the main reason the Vellas are in Mallorca."

I rested my head on my hand. "Yet Pharaoh didn't say a word about Xavier, his aunt, or grandmother."

"I concur. It doesn't add up. Pharaoh had to have known Xavier killed Mithras, not Oleander."

When our mobiles sounded simultaneously with an alert different from the one used for the coalition, Verity's eyes opened wide.

"I set up our own surveillance of the premises."

"Something else you did in the middle of the night?"

"Nah. I did it while you were in the shower, err..."

Verity held up her hand while studying her mobile. "I knew what you meant. It appears Schön and Macht have arrived. The bloody woman can't follow a simple order

to arrive in advance of him?”

I stood and walked to the door. “Where’s Macht?” I asked, finding Schön alone.

“He’s surveying the area.”

Surveying the area? What the hell was that about? My eyes met Verity’s while Schön removed the coat I didn’t offer to help with.

“Since we got off on a bad footing, I want you to know I’ve requested a different assignment.”

While I’d intended to suggest the same thing, I was stunned she did first. “Did you contact Nemesis?” I asked. If she had, I wondered what she told her. Not that I was worried. I’d worked with Nem a long time. She knew better than to think I’d made a move on Schön, if that was what she cited as the reason for the request.

“Yes. She hasn’t responded yet, but I’ve no doubt she’ll understand.”

Maybe I was being paranoid, but it felt as though she was baiting me.

Verity stood. “Well, then, there’s nothing more for us to discuss at this time.”

Schön, who was still holding her coat, put it back on, then walked out. I closed and locked the door behind her.

“What in the bloody hell was that about?” Verity asked.

Before I could respond, our mobiles pinged with the more familiar emergency alert, and we both lunged for them. “I hope they’ve found Z,” I said before swiping the screen to read the message.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“Thank God,” Verity whispered.

I read the message from Nem confirming they had and that he appeared unharmed. As we’d, or at least I’d, suspected, it was Puck who’d kidnapped him.

“There’s a message from Ares too.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“He said Z is refusing to press charges. In fact, he demanded Decker remove the handcuffs he’d slapped on Puck.”

“I’m sure there’s an explanation. Nemesis said Z has requested everyone meet at his townhouse. It’s a two-hour drive from where they are now. She also said that once the meeting concludes, she’ll send a brief.”

“Copy that. In the meantime, do you want to get out of here for a bit?” I suggested.

“Absolutely. I feel as though if I don’t, I’ll crawl out of my skin.”

I’d trust my gut regardless, but since Verity seemed as troubled as I, it multiplied my uneasiness about this op. Something seemed off, and it wasn’t just the situation with Schön.

“However, we have the meeting with Macht and Reaper,” she reminded me.

“I’ll tell them something’s come up. No doubt, Reaper received the same message

from Nemesis.”

“Right. Before we go anywhere, we should change your appearance a bit too.”

“Why?” I asked after sending the text.

“You’re too recognizable.”

“Some of the resort staff have already seen me. Is it really necessary?”

“You were part of the op on Gozo, Zeppelin. We’re in St. Moritz to follow the money that, in part, came from Mithras. Whoever he and Pharaoh were working with may very well have seen you either at the villa when we initially rescued the twenty victims, during the search for Bexli, or when Mithras kidnapped Francesca Vella and Xavier killed him.”

I was about to say they would’ve seen her too, but right now, she looked nothing like she had when we’d conducted the three ops she mentioned.

“As far as the resort staff who have already seen you, I’m only suggesting minor changes to your appearance. As long as you wear a hat and glasses, they won’t notice.”

Verity motioned to a chair, and I took a seat. She pulled a brush and black powder out of a box that sat on the table beside me.

“What is that?” I asked.

“I’m going to darken your hair.”

First, she slicked it back, then she dipped the brush into the powder. I barely felt her

touch my head with it before I saw her put it away.

She rummaged through the box and pulled out a glasses case. “Here,” she said, handing me a pair that looked similar to those Clark Kent wore before he transformed into Superman.

“That should be good enough for now. Just be sure to wear your hat and scarf as well.”

“I was afraid you were going to make me wear a prosthetic nose.”

“Yours isn’t that remarkable.”

I scoffed.

“Your hair and eyes are more noticeable. Well, and these.” She put her hand on my upper arm and squeezed. “It’s easier to add than it is to take away.”

“Which explains this.” I waved my hand in front of her breasts.

“I figured you’d prefer them this way.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

I grabbed her wrist. “Verity?” I waited until her eyes met mine before I continued.

“What?”

“I prefer the way you are naturally. Hair, eyes, and breasts.”

9

VERITY

“Are you wearing your ring?” Zeppelin asked when we got in the SUV.

“I can’t wear gloves if I have it on, and my hands are freezing.”

“Turn it around.”

I rolled my eyes at my own stupidity, then pulled the glove on. It was somewhat uncomfortable, but not as bad. Certainly better than getting frostbit fingers.

“Is there anywhere in particular you want to go?” he asked.

“We could check out the main tourist area or one of the ski resorts.”

“Let’s go downtown.” He had a funny look on his face.

“What?” I asked.

“It’s minus six.” He shuddered as if just saying it made him cold.

“Are you hungry?” I realized it was almost fifteen hundred, and we hadn’t eaten yet today. Or at least I hadn’t.

The funny look on his face remained, although it was slightly different.

“You ate last night’s dessert, didn’t you?”

He laughed. “Not all of it.”

I shook my head. “I wish I would’ve remembered we had it.”

“Maybe we should pick a few things up to have at the chalet.”

“The resort offers grocery delivery,” I said, looking online.

Zeppelin nodded but didn’t say anything.

“Do you need me to give you the GPS coordinates for downtown?”

“I got them. They’re in the heads-up display.”

He was usually the more talkative of the two of us, so I was having a hard time coming up with conversation. “How did you get your code name?” I asked after several minutes of awkward silence.

“My last name is Bonham?” He phrased it like a question, so I shook my head. “John Bonham was the drummer for Led Zeppelin.”

“Right. I’m too young to be familiar with them.”

“We’re the same age, Ver. Besides, they’re one of the greatest rock bands of all time.”

I shrugged.

“What about you? Verity tells no lies?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“Something like that,” I murmured.

His expression changed to the same one he usually got when he had an epiphany. “Z gave you your code name, didn’t he?”

I nodded. “I’ve been known to be overly idealistic. Truth, justice, and all that.”

“Nothing wrong with the credo.”

He appeared lost in thought, so I stopped trying to think of anything to say.

“Is that what’s behind your fascination with assassination?” he asked after a few minutes.

“In a way. Justice isn’t always just.”

“I agree. In my experience, it rarely is. However, where our opinions differ is I believe killing someone is letting them off too easy.”

“Assassination isn’t something that typically takes place once someone has been apprehended. Instead, it’s carried out when the bad guy is impossible to catch or outside our jurisdiction.”

“I’m going to ask you something that you don’t have to answer.”

“Go ahead,” I said.

“How many people have you assassinated?”

I felt my cheeks flush. “My standard answer is one too many. However, while I’ve been forced to kill in the line of duty, I haven’t officially started with Unit 23, which in turn means no assassinations yet.”

“Understood.”

“I may not make the move.” I stunned myself by admitting it to Zeppelin. Two days ago, there was no way I would’ve considered doing so. I laughed. Two days ago, he would’ve been the last person I’d open up to.

“What’s funny?”

“Me confiding in you.”

He smiled. “Yeah, that’s surprising.”

“How does fondue sound?”

“Amazing, but what’s the segue?”

I pointed. “That place is supposed to be really good.”

Since there was a valet out front, Zeppelin pulled right up, and, given it was between lunch and dinner, we didn’t have to wait for a table.

“Why wouldn’t you make the move?” he asked after we’d ordered a bottle of wine and the waiter poured a glass for each of us.

“I think I might miss the collaboration.” While I winked, I meant it.

“I couldn’t handle that kind of isolation.”

“You’re kidding,” I deadpanned.

“That reminds me, Elise, my love.” Zeppelin reached across the table and motioned for me to give him my hand. “Hang on.” He got up and sat beside me instead. When he leaned in and kissed my temple, it felt a little too real. Better put, I wanted it to be real.

Instead of pulling back, he leaned in closer, his mouth by my ear. “Two o’clock,” he whispered.

I glanced in that direction, then back at Zeppelin. “That’s James Godwin,” I whispered. “Wasn’t the US ambassador to Malta under indictment?” I whispered.

“The last we heard,” he whispered back.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“One would think his passport would’ve been rescinded.”

When the man looked as though he was turning his head, Zeppelin put his hand on my cheek and kissed me. I didn’t open my eyes to see if the man was paying attention, not that he’d recognize Zeppelin or me. I’d made sure of it. Instead, my focus was on how Zep’s mouth, lips, and tongue felt against mine. God, was he good at this. It reminded me how I’d wondered what sex would be like with him after the first time we’d kissed.

He pulled back before I did, rested his forehead against mine, and whispered, “Wow.”

“Um, yeah.”

The waiter cleared his throat, and we sat back, allowing him to have better access to the table. As we watched, he set the fondue pot in the center, then placed bowls of cubed bread, pearl onions, pieces of potato, and sliced pears on either side of it. I couldn’t wait to dive in.

Zeppelin leaned in again. “Does the woman with him look familiar to you?”

I glanced over at her. “Something about her is, but I can’t place her.”

“Same.”

I was seated in a better position to surreptitiously take photos, so I snapped several of the ambassador and the woman, then forwarded them to Nemesis.

A few minutes later, the two people got up and left the restaurant.

“Nem just confirmed that is Godwin, former ambassador to Malta. She said she’ll look into what happened with his indictment.”

“Any hits on the woman?” he asked.

I sent another message, asking, then shook my head when she said there weren’t any yet.

“Look!” I gasped when I saw Schön walking in the same direction Godwin and the woman had gone.

Macht was with her, and she had her arm through his.

“Do you think she’s tailing them?” I asked.

“Definitely.” Zeppelin pulled out his mobile and sent a message. “Ares will have the NRO triangulate our location, then pull overheads for us. We should be able to track both couples.”

He signaled the waiter for our check, then studied his mobile. “They’ve got a read on them already.”

“They’ve located the ambassador and the mystery woman?”

“They’re en route, headed in the direction of Châteaux Relais.”

My eyes opened wide. “What are the odds?”

“I’d say I’m surprised, but I’m not.” He studied the screen. “Schön and Macht are

still tailing them.”

“I think it’s time you contacted Nemesis. We need a better idea of what’s actually happening with the woman,” I suggested.

We hastily paid the bill, then returned to the SUV, where Zeppelin placed a call to Nemesis. Unfortunately, she didn’t respond.

Seconds later, his mobile rang with a call from Magnet.

“How goes it with the wife?” I heard him ask when Zeppelin answered.

“Great. Best one I’ve ever had.”

Magnet laughed. “She’s sitting right there and can hear me, can’t she?”

“Every word,” Zeppelin responded. “I’m sure you didn’t call for a report on how our honeymoon is going.”

“Actually, I wanted to know what went down with Schön.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“What do you mean?”

“I received a call from Nemesis, saying she was removing her from the Swiss task force and wanted to add her to mine.”

“Did she say why?”

“She didn’t. That’s why I rang you.”

“We had a couple of, err, misunderstandings.”

“Go on.”

“She tried to kiss me.”

“Schön?”

Zeppelin turned to me and rolled his eyes. “Isn’t that who we’re talking about, Mag? Anyway, it wasn’t just that. It hasn’t been an hour since she told Verity and me she’d asked to be reassigned. A few minutes ago, we spotted her tailing one of our suspects.”

“That’s not good. Regardless of whether she’s moving to another task force, you know Nem would never condone any agent acting outside the chain of command.”

“My thoughts precisely. I tried to call Nem, but it went to voicemail.”

“She’s in a meeting, but once it ends, I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Thanks, Mag.”

Zeppelin stared at his mobile after ending the call.

“What do you think she’s up to?” I asked.

“No idea. Honestly? I’m beginning to think the world has gone mad and you and I are the only two sane people left, and, yeah, the irony doesn’t escape me.”

10

ZEPPELIN

“We need to get Schön out of St. Moritz before she destroys more than just this op,” Verity said, looking out the window as I drove back to the resort.

I scrubbed my face. “You’re right. She needs to go as soon as we can make it happen.”

Both our mobiles vibrated. Verity swiped hers. “Nemesis just sent a brief on Z’s abduction and rescue.”

“Do you want to read it aloud?” I asked.

Verity shook her head. “I cannot.”

“You can read, can’t you, Verity?” I said, winking when I repeated her words from yesterday back to her.

“I’m prone to motion sickness.”

I feigned shock. “A Unit 23-er gets carsick?”

“We refer to ourselves as 23-ers. Not that I feel much like one presently.”

Admittedly, I found it curious that Typhon would tap her for the unit, then immediately say she was on permanent loan to the coalition, so I asked why she thought he had.

“According to Oleander, it was so no one else attempted to hire me out from under him. Or move me up the ranks at MI6.”

“Assistant chief?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

She shuddered. “God, no. I don’t think there’s much more to the job than report-filing.”

“You would’ve been in position to replace Z.”

Verity shook her head. “Everyone knew the job would go to Pinch when the time came.”

“Pinch was DG of MI5. Who is the assistant chief?” It occurred to me it was something I should know.

“Roland Merriweather retired a month ago. Z hadn’t found a replacement. Honestly, everyone thought the position would go to George. Now, we know better.”

We were within a mile of Châteaux Relais when we received an alert with an update from the NRO. I pulled off the main highway and parked on a side road.

“It seems our resort is favored by the former ambassador,” I muttered.

“Should I assume Schön and Macht are there as well?”

“You should. I’ll return to the chalet. For now, it’ll be easier to watch their movement from there.”

We’d been inside less than five minutes when my mobile pinged, indicating Schön was approaching the chalet’s front door.

“This should be interesting. Do you think Magnet spoke to Nem, who in turn is sending her to us?” Verity commented.

I shrugged. “I guess we’ll see. Maybe if we give her enough rope, she’ll hang herself, as they say.” I opened the door, and this time, when I waved her inside, Macht was on her heels.

“The Maltese ambassador is on the premises,” she began.

“He’s the former US ambassador to Malta,” Verity corrected.

Schön shot her a look, then turned to me and continued. “The ambassador arrived Thursday, 9 November, and checked into Châteaux Relais. On Friday, 10 November, he visited UBS—Union Bank of Switzerland.”

“Alone?” I asked.

“Another man was with him, but he stayed some distance from him. Presumably, he was a bodyguard.”

“Go on.”

“He spent approximately one hour at UBS. From there, he went directly to BJB—Bank Julius Bär—where he spent another hour.”

“Who did he meet with at each bank?” I asked.

“In both instances, it was the manager on duty.”

Every so often, I glanced at Verity, who was standing a few paces to the rear and side of Schön. “What did he do when he left BJB?”

“He returned to Châteaux Relais.”

“Did the respective bank managers tell you what the ambassador did while at their banks? What the reason was for his visit?” I asked.

“They could not divulge that information.”

“Were you aware he was dining with a female companion at Fondetta this afternoon?” I asked.

Her eyes darted from side to side. “Um, yes.”

“I’m curious. Were you also in the vicinity of Fondetta?”

“Yes.”

“Speaking with the bank managers?”

“No, that was...”

“Were you going to say that was yesterday, Schön?”

“That isn’t... I mean to say...”

I walked over to Verity, who looked as though she was about to applaud my interrogation. “Well done,” she whispered.

“Please, sit,” I said, motioning Schön and Macht to the sofa and two chairs. “Can I get either of you anything to drink? A glass of wine, perhaps? Or beer?” I looked at Verity. “Do we have beer?”

She shrugged and bit her bottom lip, I was sure it was to keep from laughing.

Macht remained standing where he was while Schön took her time walking the few steps to the sitting area. “Wine would be nice, thank you,” Schön said. Macht shook his head.

“Let me get it,” Verity offered.

“I’ll help.”

It was impossible for us to talk in the open space, but we didn’t need to. We were on the same page about Schön. She was acting outside of authority as if she had permission to do so. “Baissier?” I mouthed.

Verity nodded.

“Agent Baur, I’m curious as to why you didn’t mention any of this yesterday or even earlier today,” I said, handing her the glass of wine.

“I was, um, still preparing the report.”

“That you sent directly to Ambassador Marchand?” I asked.

When her eyes opened wide, I knew my theory was correct. She raised her chin.
“Heist the head of the coalition.”

I nodded slowly.

“The ambassador who recommended you to work for the coalition by joining the Swiss task force, yes?” Verity asked, looking at something on her mobile.

Schön nodded.

“Was he also the person you spoke with regarding a reassignment?” I asked.

“That’s irrelevant,” she responded.

“I’m not sure it is. You’ve been tracking the former ambassador on your own rather than reporting what you’d learned to us.”

“As I said, I submitted my report directly.”

“After asking to be reassigned, you went above our heads on an op Zeppelin owns,” challenged Verity. “That should be grounds for censure, at the very least.”

While Schön's defiant expression remained, Macht appeared contrite.

Under normal circumstances, I would contact Nemesis and immediately report the woman's actions outside authority. However, in this instance, my gut was telling me not to. I would reach out, of course, but allow them to determine what to do about Schön. If I pushed for her reassignment to be denied, she might retaliate and put the op, as well as the entire mission, in jeopardy—not that she wasn't compromising it already.

I cleared my throat. "Clearly, you believed this was the best course of action. I'll admit I'm curious as to why you decided to share this information with us now."

"It was suggested I should," she responded.

"By Ambassador Marchand?"

"Yes."

"Do you have anything further to share with us at this time?" I asked.

“I do not.”

“This meeting is over.” I stood, then turned to Macht. “Be prepared to meet with Reaper, Verity, and me in one hour.”

“Yes, sir,” he said.

Schön appeared stunned when I walked to the door and held it open.

“So, did she decide to act on this on her own, or was it with Marchand’s blessing?” Verity said after the two had put on their coats and left without saying much other than goodbye.

“I don’t have a strong opinion either way. The only thing I am certain of is we need to exercise caution where Schön is concerned.”

“What about Macht?”

“We can learn more from him if we allow him to stay on, at least temporarily.”

“Agreed.” Verity nodded and stood by the window.

“What’s on your mind?”

“If Schön’s actions were either condoned or encouraged by Marchand, Nemesis has a big problem on her hands.”

“Z has been the one to run interference on our behalf in the past. Now that he’s resigned as chief, we’ll no longer have his support.”

“We might. He could continue as an advisor to the coalition even though he’s no longer with MI6. He’d be in the same role as his daughter, Wren, and her husband, Wilder.”

Verity had a point. “I suppose it depends on whether his resignation is specific to SIS or to all intelligence.”

“If I had to guess, I’d say he got tired of being a paper pusher. He seemed different during the ops he participated in for the AMPS mission. It was as if donning tactical gear made him feel like an agent again.”

I agreed. “And then, there’s George. I’m sure being with her will make him feel like a randy young man.” While I smiled, this thing with Schön weighed heavily on me.

“Back to work?” Verity asked.

“We should do.” I sat on the bed and opened my computer. “Our goal now is to figure out whether the woman with Godwin at the restaurant is relevant, what his role is with AMPS, and why he isn’t in prison.”

Verity checked her mobile. “I hesitate to interrupt Nemesis again. My guess is the meeting at Z’s is still taking place.”

When she turned her head away from me, I studied her. Each time I did, I saw things I hadn’t noticed before. Her beauty, of course, but so much more. Right now, her shoulders were hunched. Was she feeling insecure? If so, it would surprise me. I’d always believed her to be arrogant rather than lacking self-esteem. Perhaps it was something she did when worried.

Instead of continuing to watch from a distance, I joined her at the window. “It’s certainly picturesque,” I commented, noting the falling snow similar to when we arrived yesterday. “I was thinking we should dine in the main lodge tonight. Make ourselves visible.”

“Agreed,” she murmured.

“And tomorrow? Would you be interested in hitting the slopes?” I asked.

“I was about to suggest the same thing.”

While keeping my thoughts to myself might be more prudent, I’d never been one to hold back. “Amazing, isn’t it, how we so often have the same thoughts?”

“I suppose.” She shrugged without looking at me, her shoulders once again hunched.

At once, every part of my body longed for hers. My lips to kiss her. My arms to draw her to me. My cock to bury itself in her heat. “Alena,” I whispered, leaning close enough for our shoulders to brush.

She turned, her eyes boring into mine.

“I wonder if we’re thinking the same thing now.”

“Why did you call me Alena?” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

I reached out and stroked her hair. “Verity, when we’re arguing. Elise, when we aren’t. Alena, when I cannot resist kissing you.” I waited, giving her time to step away. When she didn’t, I cupped her cheek and brought my lips to hers.

Like the two other times we’d kissed, I was nearly unmanned by how good, how right, it felt. Her mouth was like heaven, so soft and inviting. I snaked one arm around her waist, pulling her body flush with mine.

“Zeppelin,” she said, breaking our kiss, much to my disappointment.

“Call me Henry.”

“Henry,” she whispered as if she was seeing how my name felt spoken from her lips.

“What do you want to say to me?”

Rather than speak, she leaned up, reigniting the passion of the kiss she’d abruptly ended moments ago. Wanting to feel more of her body against mine, I maneuvered us to the bed, then lifted her in my arms before gently resting her on the thick blankets. With one knee on the mattress and one foot still on the floor, I waited for her to protest. She reached for me instead, and I lay beside her.

When she turned to face me, her eyes were dark with desire.

“Alena,” I repeated.

“Henry,” she said for the second time.

“I want you more than I dreamed possible.”

She bit her bottom lip, and I leaned in to run my tongue over it. Rather than take things any further sexually, I kissed her again and again. It seemed as though we'd spent hours, rather than minutes, “making out” before I rolled to my back and she rested her head above my heart.

I stared at the falling snow until it was almost dark, and when I heard the soft snores of the woman in my arms and felt her breathing even out, I allowed my eyes to close too.

11

VERITY

When I woke, it was dark outside and Zeppelin was stacking wood in the fireplace. Had I dreamed I'd fallen asleep in his arms after we'd spent what felt like hours kissing?

When he peered over his shoulder at me and smiled, I knew it hadn't been a dream at all.

In my line of work, I faced danger on a regular basis, but nothing like this. There were many things on the line right now. My professional reputation. My role in this op. But mostly, my heart.

I was playing with fire when it came to Zeppelin. What he might consider innocent flirtation, taking advantage of the fact we were alone in the most romantic setting I'd ever been, wasn't innocuous for me. I was already falling for the man who, two days ago, I couldn't tolerate for the length of a single conversation.

No doubt, tête-à-tête such as ours was commonplace for him. Like I had before, although for an entirely different reason, I considered contacting Nemesis to ask to be reassigned. But what reason would I give? I could hardly suggest the attraction between Zep and me was one-sided. I could admit to being uncomfortable, but wasn't that as much my own doing as his?

He stood but didn't return to the bed. "Would you still like to go to the main lodge for dinner?"

I sat up. "I suppose we should."

"Don't do that."

I cocked my head. "Do what?"

"Bite your lip. It makes me want to soothe it with my tongue."

A shudder rippled through my body, stopping between my legs. "Zeppelin," I whispered.

"Henry."

I lay back down, dizzy with want for him. I turned my back to the middle of the bed when he lay beside me, nearly groaning when he wrapped his body around mine.

"Don't do that," he repeated.

"I wasn't biting my lip."

“Don’t second-guess this.”

Rather than groan, I nearly wept. “How can I not? This may be commonplace for you, but it isn’t for me.”

“It isn’t for me, either, Alena. I swear it isn’t. I don’t get involved with people I work with, especially when we’re in the middle of an op.”

I tried to wriggle from his arms, but he wouldn’t let me. “Then, what are we doing?”

“What we cannot resist.”

“Zep—”

“Henry.” He brushed my hair from my neck and pressed a kiss beneath my ear. “Say it.”

“Henry.”

“Do you know what it does to me to hear you say my name?” He pressed his rigid cock between the cheeks of my bottom. “Just being near you makes me so hard it’s sometimes difficult to walk.”

I looked over my shoulder at him.

“Remember when you scolded me for almost forgetting to tip our sleigh driver?”

“Bernard?”

“Yeah. I took one look at this bed and pictured you on it. Naked, legs spread, holding your hand out to me, begging me to join you.” He brought his hand to my breast, pinching my nipple between his thumb and index finger. “Touching you, tasting you, burying myself deep inside you.”

My body writhed of its own accord.

“You like that idea, don’t you?”

I couldn’t lie; my pussy throbbed, aching for him.

“You thought I was picturing Schön, but I wasn’t. From the moment we stepped into the chalet, it’s been all you, Alena.”

“You hated me.”

He kissed my neck but dropped his hand from my breast. “I never hated you. Especially not as much as you hated me.”

“I never hated you, either.”

“Look at me.”

I turned my body so I faced him.

“Maybe, all along, it was pent-up sexual frustration.”

Chuckling, I shook my head. “I don’t think that was it.”

“Bloody hell,” Zeppelin muttered when our mobiles vibrated, followed by a knock at the door.

“Who’s that?”

“Most likely the sleigh driver. Before you dozed off, I requested he give us a lift to the lodge for dinner.” He looked at his watch. “It completely slipped my mind, and our reservation is in twenty minutes.”

“Oh!” I sat up and ran my hand over my hair. “Do I look a mess?”

Zeppelin smiled. “No, but you do look like you’ve been ravished.” He reached out and swiped my mouth with his thumb. “Lips swollen from being kissed.” His hand returned to my breast. “Nipples hard.”

“Henry...”

Page 40

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

His eyes closed for a few seconds, then opened. “Neither of us is fit to open the door,” he said when we heard a second knock.

“Should we ask him to come back?”

Zeppelin shook his head. “If we don’t leave now, I may never let you out of this bed.”

While that didn’t sound half bad, I feared if we took things any further sexually, we’d both regret it. “Ask him for five more minutes.”

He nodded and rolled from the bed. “Be right out,” he shouted.

“I’ll be waiting in the sleigh,” a voice that sounded much like Macht’s shouted back.

“Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Evans,” the Swiss agent said when we joined him several minutes later. Like Bernard, he helped us into the sleigh. Unlike the other driver, he didn’t offer any hot cocoa.

“The ambassador is dining alone this evening,” he reported when we were halfway between the chalet and the lodge.

“Did you recognize the woman he was dining with earlier at Fondetta?” I asked.

“Negative,” he responded. “It was the first time I saw him with her.”

“What is your area of expertise, Macht?” asked Zeppelin.

“My team focuses on counterintelligence as well as covert diplomatic support for people like Schön’s uncle.”

“Her uncle?” Zeppelin and I asked at the same time.

“Ambassador Marchand.”

At least that explained how the woman was able to get the man to do her bidding. The idea that she may have used “other means” made me sick to my stomach.

“Are you available to meet with us after dinner?” Zeppelin asked.

“Yes. I am scheduled to provide your return ride to the chalet.”

“Excellent,” Zep responded, putting his arm around my shoulders when the lodge was in view. Like I had on our first sleigh ride, I rested my head on his shoulder.

“Reaper, err, American businessman Kevin McNamara is also dining in the lodge this evening. His table is one over from the ambassador’s,” said Macht before he pulled up near the valet area.

Once we were inside, we learned he’d arranged for our rounded booth to be in full view of the former ambassador’s table, but in order to see us, he would’ve had to switch seats.

“He seems agitated,” I leaned in and whispered a few minutes after we’d arrived. In that time, Godwin had alternated between typing something on his mobile and all but slamming the device on the table, only to pick it up and repeat the process.

Less than five minutes later, Godwin stood and left, seemingly before his dinner was served.

“Macht’s on him,” Zep reported, looking at his mobile at the same time I made eye contact with Reaper, who waited several seconds, then followed Godwin out of the dining room.

“I’m starting to feel guilty,” I said, taking a sip of the wine Zeppelin ordered.

“About?”

“We haven’t done much since our arrival in St. Moritz we couldn’t have accomplished from Shere.”

He leaned in and nuzzled my neck. “I beg to differ, my darling Elise.”

I turned my head, and we kissed.

“Can you imagine the look on everyone’s faces if I attempted kissing you at the command center?” He chuckled. “The look on your face alone?” When I felt my face flush, Zep stopped laughing and stroked my cheek with his fingertip. “I promise I’m not poking fun.”

I hated to admit it, but I was on the verge of tears. “You aren’t?”

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“I would never.” I smirked and raised a brow but laughed when he added, “Any longer.”

Given neither of us was hungry after our late lunch and we were anxious to speak with Macht and Reaper about Godwin’s abrupt departure from the restaurant, we asked our waiter to package our meal to take with us.

“Macht is waiting out front,” Zeppelin leaned in and whispered just as the waiter returned with our packaged food.

“Reaper and I were able to plant listening devices inside Godwin’s room. He’s monitoring the former ambassador now,” he reported once we were some distance from the lodge.

“Copy that,” said Zeppelin.

The three of us remained quiet until we could see the chalet in the distance. My mobile buzzed with an alert, as did Zeppelin’s.

“Go that way,” he said, pointing to an offshoot that went in a different direction after checking his phone. “Stop here,” he added when we reached a densely forested area. “Someone is casing the chalet.”

I pulled out my own phone, swiped the screen, and handed it to Macht.

From what I could see on Zep’s mobile, it would be impossible to identify the person, given they were covered almost entirely in black, including a full ski mask and

gloves.

“It’s Hans,” said Macht almost immediately.

I took a closer look. “The valet? How can you tell?”

He zoomed in on the video and pointed to the man’s boots. “Those are Dolomites,” he explained. “They’re very expensive and typically sold with white laces. Those are red.”

“Surely, that isn’t unusual enough to say with certainty it’s Hans.”

He zoomed in further. “Look at the way the left one is frayed on the end. It’s Hans.”

My eyes met Zeppelin’s. “What do you want to do?”

“You wait here. Macht and I will go through the woods and see what he’s up to.”

I was about to lose my temper when I heard Zep add, “Hang on. Different plan. Macht, can you secure the horses?”

“Of course,” he said, getting out of the sleigh and tying them off.

“What made you change your mind about me joining you?” I asked, climbing out of the sleigh on my own rather than take the hand he offered.

He leaned in and whispered, “Something in your eyes told me I might end up as your first assassination victim if I didn’t.”

“You were very close, Zeppelin.”

He pointed to a trail that weaved through the trees but put his hand on my arm when I took a step in that direction.

“Can I tell you how much the tone of your voice just now turned me on?”

I kept walking but glanced over my shoulder. “You can tell me later.”

Once we arrived at the chalet, we saw Hans attempting to gain access through a window near the trees where Zep had pointed out the two black foxes. He and I went around one side while Macht went in the opposite direction.

We stood a few feet away, firearms at the ready, watching as Macht approached Hans and asked what he was doing. The two men argued in Swiss German, Hans telling Macht to mind his own business.

Once he gave us a head nod, indicating it was safe for us to approach, Zeppelin called out to both men. “Is there something amiss with the chalet?” he asked in a loud voice.

Macht stared Hans down.

“The housekeeping staff said there was a leak,” he responded. Even in the low amount of light, I could see his eyes darting back and forth.

“You might have more luck checking inside,” Zep suggested.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

I nearly laughed out loud at the way Macht glared at Hans, waiting for his response.

“Sure, yes,” the man finally said, rubbing the back of his neck.

Zeppelin was holding my hand, but dropped it when his mobile vibrated. Neither Macht nor Hans appeared to notice.

“You two go on in. We’re going to take a walk by the stream,” he told them, leading me far enough away from the chalet that neither man could see us once they were inside.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Reaper said Godwin is on the move,” he responded. “He’s got the NRO engaged.”

Zep and I raced over to the parked SUV.

While he drove, I kept us on target with the overhead tracking the NRO supplied. “It appears he’s headed to Zurich,” I said once we were beyond the turnoff for the heliport. “He’s not driving,” I added when a close-up image appeared on my screen.

“Who is? The mystery woman?” Zeppelin asked.

“No. A man. As Schön said, presumably his bodyguard.” The word she’d used was not widely employed in the intelligence world. In fact, if I’d said it, Zeppelin would’ve probably given me a boatload of shit for doing so. Not that I ever would have.

A few seconds later, an alert appeared from Nemesis. I swiped the screen to read it. “According to authorities in DC, James Godwin is currently at his apartment, where he’s been for the last several days. He is still under indictment and on house arrest. As we both know, that is not the case.”

“Interesting.”

“They’re sending someone now to check, but apparently, he’s required to wear an ankle monitor.”

Zeppelin looked in my direction. “Twins? Again? It cannot be.”

I shook my head. “I’m more inclined to think Godwin knows someone with the ability to override what the device is transmitting.”

“Theoretically, he’s removed the cuff, jumped bail, and has no intention of returning to the States.”

“That’s logical.”

“And he has a connection to AMPS,” he added.

“Agreed. Which means we need to know how many flights leave Zurich headed to a country without an extradition treaty.” Rather than send another message to Nemesis, I rang her.

“Hold on, Ashford is here,” she said, putting me on speaker. I did the same, then gave her a quick rundown of what had taken place in the time since we arrived in Switzerland.

“At this hour, I don’t know how much support I can drum up in Zurich to prevent an

alleged fugitive from boarding a plane. The two of you and Reaper will need to make it happen on your own. If I can get backup in place, I will,” said Nemesis.

“I’ll work on the flights,” said Decker.

“Roger that. Oh, and Nem, when this is over, we need to talk about Schön and Ambassador Marchand.”

“Yes, Verity, we most certainly do. Let’s touch base in the morning. I’m waiting on more information that I’d prefer to have on hand when we speak.”

“Roger that, ma’am.”

“Think they’re on to us?” Zep asked, hanging back when the vehicle Godwin was riding in veered off on a dark side road.

I readied my weapon, anticipating we’d be intercepting the ambassador and the man with him wherever they were headed now, rather than at the airport.

We rounded a bend, and the forest opened to a clearing where a helicopter sat waiting. Godwin’s driver pulled up close to the blade, and two men jumped out of the SUV. By the time we did the same, the aircraft had lifted off.

Zeppelin was already on his mobile, reporting it to Nem, when I got back in the vehicle.

“The closest major airports are Zurich and Milan. There’s no way in hell we’d make it to either in time to intercept them,” I heard him say.

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“You’re right,” said Decker. “Particularly given Godwin is unlikely to be flying commercial. Give me a few minutes to dig deeper into this.”

“Copy that,” Zeppelin muttered, leaning against the seat and closing his eyes after the call ended.

“Macht says he has an update about Hans.”

“Tell him we’ll be back in twenty and have Reaper meet us at the chalet.”

“Roger that,” I said, sending messages to both men.

Zep put the SUV in gear, and we rode in silence on our return trip to the resort.

12

ZEPPELIN

Macht and Reaper were waiting inside the chalet when Verity and I returned, holding what looked like a recording device at least two decades old.

“This is what Hans was after,” Macht said when we approached.

“Is there anything on it?” Verity asked.

He nodded. “I don’t know how much. I turned it off when I heard your voices.”

“Where is Hans?”

“On duty, so he had to leave,” said Macht.

“Why do you still have what he was after?”

He smiled. “He offered to pay me half of what he was paid if I would deliver it to the place he was instructed to leave it.”

“You’ve got to be joking,” said Verity.

“Whoever hired Hans is unaware of his stupidity,” said Macht, shaking his head. “A perfect example is that he attempted to get in through the window when he could have easily used his master key.”

“Who hired him?” I asked.

“He says he doesn’t know. Someone offered him a hundred Swiss francs to retrieve it from the chalet and take it to the Corviglia ski area.”

Verity cocked her head. “Then what?”

He held up a key that had been sitting on the table next to him. “I am to leave it in locker XX427.”

“When?” I asked.

“By ten hundred tomorrow.”

“Why didn’t he just do it himself?” I would agree Hans wasn’t terribly bright, but this made no sense to me.

“He is on duty tomorrow too. And before you inquire, it either did not occur to him to ask me to cover his shift, or he fears what will happen when the key is delivered.”

Verity’s eyes scrunched. “What does he fear?”

Macht smirked. “The bogeyman.”

“Well, then. I suppose this means we will be visiting the ski area tomorrow. Sadly, though, not to ski.” I turned to Reaper. “Tell us what you found out about Godwin.”

“The argument he appeared to be having in the dining area continued once he reached the room. He didn’t mention any names, and I couldn’t hear the other side of the conversation. The gist of it was that whoever he was talking to apparently insisted Godwin leave St. Moritz, to which he responded he couldn’t yet. He had unfinished business.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

I rolled my shoulders and gripped the back of the chair in front of me. “It appears someone is on to us.”

“Macht, I need to ask you something,” said Verity.

“Go ahead.”

“How much of a threat is Schön?”

“More to herself than to anyone else,” he said, eyes downcast. “She is very intelligent and has it in her to be a good agent.”

“But?”

“Given her appearance, her role in intelligence thus far has been as a honey trap. She’s trying to escape being...What is the word? Pigeonholed? My understanding is Ambassador Marchand is helping facilitate her transition away from such assignments.”

“Which is why he recommended her for the Swiss task force,” I muttered, shaking my head. “How well did you know her prior to this assignment?”

“I knew of her, but we hadn’t met until we both arrived in Zurich on Thursday.”

“How did Godwin end up on Schön’s radar?” Verity asked.

“She saw him leaving the terminal at the same time we were.”

“How did she know who he was?”

“Briefs,” I said, answering Verity’s question before Macht could. “An agent who hadn’t been vetted by anyone other than Marchand was given highly classified briefs, which she, in turn, used to circumvent command and go off half-cocked on my bloody op.” My voice increased with every word I spoke to the point I was shouting. I shook my head. Marchand was quickly becoming a liability to the coalition he’d amassed.

This was not the first time I’d heard he gave information to someone without Nemesis’ consent or knowledge. The most recent had been to the father of the Maltese task force commander, Poseidon. His dad was the former Italian ambassador to the UN and a crony of Marchand’s.

Both Poseidon and Nemesis had been furious over the leak. And, as I said to Verity earlier, it was one instance when Z had run interference.

I glanced at Verity. Her forehead was furrowed. “What are you thinking?”

“Godwin wasn’t on our radar.”

“So why was he on Marchand’s?”

She nodded. “Precisely.”

I turned to Macht. “You said Schön saw Godwin leaving the terminal. Who was with him?”

“No one that she or I saw.”

I nodded. “I want you to think very hard about what you remember about Godwin,

the woman with him at the restaurant, the man who accompanied him on his visits to the two banks, and anyone else you saw him interact with, regardless of how inconsequential it may seem.”

“Roger that, sir.”

“Reaper, I’d like you to do the same. Everything you saw and heard, along with what you’ve already reported. We’ll reconvene in the morning before we head to Corviglia.”

“Roger that,” said Reaper.

“In the meantime, Verity and I will gather whatever information we can on our end.”

“What time was your flight on Thursday?” Verity asked.

“I arrived at twelve hundred.”

“And Schön?”

“One hour later.”

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

I held up the recording device. “Macht, I want you to leave this with us tonight.”

He nodded once before repeating, “Roger that, sir.”

“Thank you, gentlemen. Let’s meet here at zero seven hundred.”

Both men uttered their responses, then left.

Verity was standing by the window. Her arms were folded, and her shoulders were hunched.

“Come here,” I said.

“Sorry, what?”

Instead of waiting for her to approach me, I stepped closer and drew her into an embrace. When she put her arms around me, I let out the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

“I’m worried about Marchand,” she said, resting her head against my chest.

“As am I.”

“We need to find out when Schön is due to report to the command center.”

“Again, we’re on the same wavelength.” I rested my cheek against her hair, wishing she was no longer wearing the wig.

“I need to get out of all this,” she said, moving away and waving her hand down her body.

I smiled. “Can I help?”

Verity’s eyes scrunched. “Zeppelin...”

“Not Henry?”

She took my hands in hers. “I need us to take a step back from Henry and Alena.”

Her words hit me in the gut, but I got it. As I’d told her, this was the first time I’d gotten involved with another agent during an op. “I’m disappointed, but I understand.”

“You do?”

I squeezed her fingers. “Is it that surprising?”

“No, but...”

I raised a brow.

“Never mind,” she mumbled.

I wrapped one arm around her waist and pulled her body into mine. “Did you want me to protest? Tell you I wouldn’t be able to stand it if I couldn’t kiss you?”

“You’re being mean.” She tried to wriggle from my grasp, but I wasn’t ready to let go.

“How about I just be honest?”

“That would be refreshing.”

“Now, who’s being mean? Me or you?”

She looked down at the floor. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

I cupped her cheek and looked into her eyes when she raised them. “I want you more than I’ve ever wanted another woman. Not just for kisses, although I’d be happy with a lot more of those. Not just for touching, but whenever we do, I feel a sense of contentment I’ve never experienced before. And, as much as I want to make love to you, I know it isn’t the right time. What I want is just...you. Getting to know you. Working with you. God, just talking to you makes me feel things I’ve never felt with anyone else.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

Her eyes darted between mine.

“We never gave each other a chance, Alena. For whatever reason, early on, we both decided the other was an adversary. You thought I hated you. I didn’t.”

“Everything you said just now...”

I dropped her hand and put my second arm around her. “I feel like I’ve just bared my soul. My self-confidence is hanging by a thread,” I admitted.

She rested her hands on my chest. “You’re very different than I thought.”

Rather than tell her it was the same for me, I kept my mouth shut. I’d already said too much. It was her turn to tell me how she felt.

“All of those things...I feel the same way.”

I grinned. “More kisses would make you happy?”

She nodded.

“More touching?”

“Yes.” She bit her bottom lip, and God, how I wanted to run my tongue over it.

“More talking, working together, getting to know each other.”

“Like me, you think it’s too soon for us to make love?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Something tells me it will be worth waiting for.”

“I’m going to bathe.”

I dropped my arms, and she took a step back. “Probably not a smart thing for us to do together.” I winked.

“Not yet.”

I didn’t say it, but I knew that would be worth waiting for too.

Shortly after she’d shut the door, I received an alert. “Hello, Nemesis,” I said, answering her call.

“I tried Verity. She didn’t pick up. I wanted to give you both an update on Schön.”

The woman was literally the last person I wanted to talk about. “Go on.”

“She’s on her way here presently. What I need to know is if you think she’s responsible for compromising your cover.”

“It’s possible, but, Nem, I think the bigger problem is Marchand.”

“Bloody hell,” she muttered. “I agreed to give Z space, but I need his advice.”

“Surely, he’d understand.”

“No. I cannot. The man has literally asked for nothing in the years since I’ve known him. He deserves to be left alone.”

“Who is above Marchand?”

“Only the secretary-general, Elizabeth Russell.”

“She’s American.”

“Yes, but I doubt Ares would be able to get an audience with her.”

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“Maybe not, but his boss certainly could.” Kade “Doc” Butler was among the most respected people in the intelligence community. He’d turned it down, but more than once, he’d been offered the job of CIA director. Some said if he decided to, the man could easily run for president and win. “Or Decker.”

“Right. Thank you, Zeppelin. At the very least, one or both of them could suggest someone else who’d be able to get an audience with her. I truly hate to go above Marchand’s head, but I feel I must.”

“There is no other option, Nem. He’s put the coalition he created in jeopardy.”

“Understood. Again, thanks, Zep.”

Before we ended the call, I told her what had transpired last night and about the stakeout we had planned for tomorrow morning.

No sooner had I rang off when another call came in from Magnet.

“Hey, Zep. Are you free to talk?”

“As a matter of fact, I am. Verity is bathing.”

“Bathing? Okay, whatever. Anyway, I’m calling about Schön.”

“Yes, quite the Charlie Foxtrot. I just got off the phone with Nem.”

“What’s your take on her?”

“As I told Nemesis, I think the bigger problem is with Marchand. She’s his niece, you know.”

“What? Good God. I didn’t.”

“That Marchand clearly kept it a secret is indicative of the bigger problem.”

“She’s about to join my task force, Zep.”

“According to Macht, the other Swiss agent assigned to this op, she’s very intelligent and has it in her to be a good agent.”

“But?”

I chuckled, remembering I’d said the same thing. “I think it best you form your own opinions.”

“Thanks a lot, mate.”

“Where are you now?” I asked, wanting to steer the conversation away from Schön.

“London. About to return to Shere. How goes it with Verity?”

I ran my hand through my hair, forgetting it was full of black powder. “Good.”

He chuckled. “Good? That’s it.”

“Better than expected?”

“You haven’t, you know...”

“No, but we have kissed.”

“Good God, Zep. What are you thinking?”

I’d tell him I wasn’t, and that was the problem. However, I wouldn’t say anything that would give him the impression I was disparaging Verity. “It’s complicated.”

“I’ll say.”

“Good night, Mag.”

“Night, Zep. Stay alive.”

“You too.”

“My turn?” I asked when Verity came out a few minutes later looking fresh-faced and so beautiful that, once again, she took my breath away.

She nodded and pointed in the direction of the kitchen. “I’m kind of hungry.”

“I could eat. If you can wait, I’ll help.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “I can’t wait.”

I smiled, shook my head, and went into the bathroom. I couldn’t wait either, but we were talking about two entirely different things.

13

VERITY

I had our dinner unpackaged and waiting by the time Zeppelin finished in the bathroom.

“I forgot to mention I spoke with Nemesis while you were in the bath. She said she rang you but you didn’t pick up.”

My God, I didn’t even notice I’d missed a call. I sighed and shook my head.

“What’s wrong?” Zeppelin asked.

“I feel like my head isn’t in the game.”

“That’s why you have a partner. When you’re on overdrive, I step up and vice versa.”

“Is that what we are? Partners?”

“Let’s eat before it gets cold.” He motioned to the table, and we both took a seat.

I waited, sensing he was weighing his words carefully. “I’m going to be honest with you about something you may not want to hear. I’ll preface it by saying I no longer feel the way I did before we left England.”

I sat back and folded my arms. “Go on.”

“There was a time I felt that, as a commander, I outranked you.”

I rolled my eyes. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“Yes, I suppose I didn’t keep it much of a secret.”

“Not even a little.”

“Like I said, I don’t feel that way anymore. In fact, I can see why Typhon was anxious to hire you for Unit 23, even though he consented to allowing you to remain working for the coalition.”

“I appreciate this very much, but?—”

“Forgive me, but please let me finish.”

“Go ahead.” I took a bite of my dinner.

“You asked if we were partners.”

I nodded.

“I would very much like us to be. I realize you’re ‘on loan’ from Unit 23, but for as long as you’re with the coalition, I’d be honored to work with you.”

Page 49

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“Wow,” I mumbled, wiping my mouth, then setting my napkin back on my lap. “Thank you, Zeppelin.”

He raised a brow. “Should I assume you don’t feel the same way?”

“No. Not at all. I mean, yes. What I’m trying to say, but failing miserably, is I’d be honored to work with you too.” When I bit my bottom lip, he smiled. “It makes things...complicated, though.”

He pushed his plate back and rested his forearms on the table. “Others have made it work. Look, I’m not saying we’re soulmates who are falling in love and will end this op getting married like some of those we work with have?—”

“Thank goodness for that.” I stood and took my nearly untouched plate to the kitchen.

“Verity?”

I kept my back to him. “If I’ve given you the impression that’s what I want, I apologize.” I blinked when I felt tears threatening. I hated how easily I cried at times. Again, so unprofessional.

“Hey,” he murmured from behind me. “I didn’t say you had. If anything, I’ve been the one initiating what’s between us.” He moved my hair from my neck and pressed his lips against my skin. “I can’t help it. You drive me mad.”

“Yes. I suppose I do. Not always in a good way.”

He turned me in his arms. “Mostly in a great way.”

“Zeppelin—”

He shook his head. “Right now, I’m Henry and you’re Alena.”

“Henry.”

He rested his forehead against mine. “Yes, Alena?”

I turned out of his arms and walked several paces away. “There isn’t much that frightens me. Good thing, since someday, I may actually be on a Unit 23 mission. Anyway, my point is, this scares me. Literally, terrifies me.”

“Which part?”

“Getting too close to you.”

He nodded. “And?”

I crossed my arms. There was no way I’d say it out loud. It was too humiliating.

He took one step in my direction, but stopped when I shook my head. “I’ll tell you what terrifies me, then.”

I waited.

“That you’ll decide this isn’t worth pursuing. That I’m not worth it.”

“But...you...I mean, you’re...” I stuttered.

This time, when he stepped closer, I dropped my arms.

“You see? Our fears aren’t so different. Whatever it was you were trying to say about me, I feel for you. You’re magnificent, Alena.”

Zeppelin held his hand out, and I took it, and when he walked over to the bed, we lay beside each other. He held me in his arms, and we looked up at the skylights, watching the snow fall.

“Nemesis plans to go above Marchand’s head,” he murmured as he stroked my hair.

“She has no choice.”

“I agree. After we rang off, Magnet called.”

“And?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“I told him to form his own opinions about Schön.”

“Good advice.”

He put his finger on my chin, and I looked up at him. “Was it?”

“I can’t say I’m a fan, but when Macht was giving us his opinion, I found myself feeling sorry for her.”

“Marchand isn’t doing her any favors. She may go down because of his actions.”

I snuggled back into him. “You were right to tell Magnet to come to his own conclusions.”

“We should listen to what’s on the recorder.”

I nodded, then rolled out of bed to grab it. I pressed play and held it to my ear, but still couldn’t hear more than the muffled sound of our voices. Then, suddenly, it stopped. My eyes opened wide, and Zeppelin and I both laughed.

“Can you imagine the look on Decker Ashford’s face if he saw this thing?” Zep said when I handed it to him.

“He’d probably laugh.”

“Or turn it into something that actually worked.”

My eyes opened wide. “Bloody hell.”

Zeppelin reached into his bag and pulled out a radio-frequency scanner, a cloth, a pair of gloves, and an evidence bag. “It isn’t transmitting anything. If it was, this would pick it up.”

“We’re probably just being paranoid.”

“Maybe.” He wiped our prints from the outside, put on the gloves, then dismantled it piece by piece before running the scanner over it again. When there was no indication of transmittal, Zeppelin put it in an evidence bag, then shoved it into his attaché. “I’ll give it to Reaper in the morning. We should get some rest.”

As difficult as it was to stop after one good-night kiss, that’s what we did. I couldn’t speak for him, but I’d been so exhausted, I was asleep within minutes.

When I woke, Zeppelin was in the kitchen, fussing with the espresso machine.

“Can I help?” I asked.

“Ah, sorry. I shouldn’t have woken you.”

“I planned to get up before now, so it’s good you did.” He stepped aside so I could fix what he was having trouble with.

While he made coffee, I checked my email and saw an update from Nem. “Schön arrived at the command center. Nemesis and Magnet are meeting with her this morning.” I kept reading. “She also reports she had luck with your suggestion about getting an audience with Secretary-General Russell.” I looked up at him. “What was your advice?”

“That she asked either Decker or Doc Butler.”

I nodded. “Well done.” I was about to don my disguise for the day when my mobile vibrated with a call. “It’s her,” I said.

“Go ahead,” he said, motioning in the direction of the lavatory.

“Good morning, Nem,” I said, swiping the screen to answer.

“Verity, I just realized the hour. I hope I didn’t ring too early.”

“Not at all. Zeppelin and I have a meeting with Macht and Reaper in an hour.”

“How are you holding up?” she asked.

“Frustrated, naturally. Particularly over Godwin escaping us last night. And, of course, the situation with Baissier and Schön.”

“I meant with you and Zeppelin. Are you free to talk?”

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

The door to the bathroom was closed, but I stepped into the kitchen area anyway and lowered my voice.

“I am, and we haven’t killed each other yet. Seriously, though, we’ve established a rhythm to accomplish our objectives.”

“We knew you would.”

“We?”

“Z and I. Actually, it was his idea that the two of you team up.”

I was stunned and had no idea how to respond.

“Hello?”

“Apologies. I’m here, I just...”

“You’ve not been in St. Moritz a full forty-eight hours, and yet you’ve ‘established a rhythm.’ That should tell you we were right.”

“It isn’t that. I had no idea Z was involved in making the decision.”

“He looks out for you in the way he does with all his agents. Although, I get the feeling he has a soft spot for you because you remind him of his daughter.”

“Wren?” I gasped. The woman was a legend in intelligence.

“She is his only daughter.”

“Apologies again. It’s just, well. She’s...you know.”

Nemesis chuckled. “Yes, I do know, and honestly, you remind me of her too.”

“Come on, Nem. I do not.”

“I said it and I meant it.”

Zeppelin came out of the lavatory, took one look at me, and raised a brow. No doubt, my cheeks were flushed.

“Listen, I won’t keep you. Zeppelin passed on what he and I discussed, yes?”

“He did.”

“Then, I’ll ring off. Let me know how the stakeout goes today.”

“Will do.” I looked up at Zeppelin when Nem ended our call.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I’m not sure anything’s wrong. It’s just that our going undercover together was Z’s idea.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“You’re not?”

“You weren’t there to witness it when he forced Nemesis and Ares together.”

“Forced?”

“Let’s say our now-fearless commander cared for Ares about as much as you cared for me.”

“Were the feelings mutual?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

Zeppelin laughed. “Oh, yeah.”

I bit my lip to stop myself from saying anything out loud, but the first thing that occurred to me was Nemesis and Ares were now married. The thing he and I had briefly touched on last night in what was one of the most awkward conversations of my life.

“I know what you’re thinking.”

When my eyes met his, I sincerely hoped he didn’t.

“Z has a way about him. He recognizes people who will make good partners. I’ve seen him do it many times over the years. He’s going to be missed.”

“He will be,” I murmured.

“And, while some of those partnerships crossed the line from professional to personal, not all did.”

I nodded, wishing someone else would call, we’d receive an alert, or Macht and Reaper would show up early. Anything to end this conversation before it turned into a continuation of last night’s.

He stepped closer and brushed my mouth with his thumb. “I told you what I want to do whenever you bite your lip.”

I took a step back. “Was I? I do it without realizing. I should, um, get ready for the

day.” I grabbed my case, hurried into the lavatory, shut the door, and locked it.

14

VERITY

“There’s Elise,” he said when I came out fifteen minutes later, wearing my wig, makeup, and exceedingly uncomfortable bra.

“This was a bad idea,” I said, motioning to my enhanced bosom.

“Don’t wear it.”

“Other than Schön, I haven’t met a single woman since we arrived in St. Moritz. Something tells me the men would notice if my bosom suddenly collapsed.”

“Hans is about to be arrested. When you saw Bernard, you spent most of the time under a blanket. Macht, well, if he notices, I’ll belt him.”

“Did you just say you’d belt him?” I laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous, Zep.”

“Jack. Or Henry. Neither would accept Macht ogling you.”

“If you really don’t think anyone will notice...”

“I don’t.”

I’d just reached the lavatory when Zeppelin grabbed my hand. “Wait.”

“Have you changed your mind? You do think someone will notice?”

He shook his head. “Let me.”

“Zeppelin...”

“Please.”

I cocked my head. “Why?”

Without answering, he put his hands on the hem of my pullover and lifted it.

“My wig.”

He carefully brought it over my head and reached around me to unfasten the bra that the prosthetics slipped into. He gently slid the straps down my arms, then set it on the table beside us. I stood before him, bare from the waist up.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“So much better,” he said, reaching out to cup my breasts.

When he wrapped one arm around my waist and lowered his mouth to my nipple, my knees nearly gave out.

“Macht and Reaper,” I whispered.

“Won’t be here for another thirty minutes,” he said before moving to the other breast.

“But we agreed—” When he pinched the tender flesh between his thumb and finger, I couldn’t think, let alone speak.

He raised his head and looked into my eyes. “I told myself being here with you would be the greatest test of my restraint.”

I smiled. “How’s it going?”

“Fairly well, considering I want my hands on you every minute of the day.”

I shuddered.

“You’re cold. I should let you dress.”

“You should,” I said, making no move to skirt around him to do so.

He trailed kisses from my lips, down my neck, stopping before he reached my nipples. “Get dressed, Alena,” he said in a low, growly voice that was sexy as fuck.

His eyes didn't waver as I walked over to the bag where I kept my regular bra or when I put it on.

"Thanks," I murmured when he handed me the pullover.

"I need one more," he said once I had it on.

Before I could ask what he meant, he pulled me close and kissed me.

"If you only knew..."

"I think I do," I said, squeezing my thighs together.

We kissed more until our mobiles vibrated with the alert that Macht and Reaper had arrived. I put my hand on his cheek and used my thumb to wipe my lipstick from his mouth. Then, while he answered the door, I went into the lavatory to reapply more.

"There isn't much beyond what I told you last night," I heard Macht say when I came out and found the three men seated at the table. I went over and joined them.

"Good morning, Macht, Reaper," I said.

"Good morning, Elise." Maybe it was Macht's smile or the way his gaze remained riveted to mine that made Zeppelin take my hand.

"That's my wife you're flirting with," he said in the same growly voice I found so sexy earlier.

Macht laughed. "You're quite a good actor. You almost had me believing what's between you is real." He winked at Zeppelin, who scowled in response.

We arrived in separate vehicles at the Corviglia ski area at zero nine hundred. Since locker XX427 was centrally located, Zeppelin and I rented two more in close proximity and loaded the ski gear Macht had thought to bring from the resort. Reaper did the same in a nearby storage area.

The instructions he'd been given said to put the recording device in a ski boot bag, then put it in the locker.

After ensuring our comms were in working order with his, Macht identified four places where we could get a good view but would also be inconspicuous. He'd also developed a schedule for us to take breaks and switch surveillance spots.

"Incoming," Macht said through the comms at ten hundred thirty on the dot.

When a man wearing a suit and tie came around the corner, I understood why Macht was so certain he was our guy.

"Does he look familiar?" Zeppelin asked him.

"Affirmative. He's the manager from BJB."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“The one Godwin met with?” I asked.

“Affirmative,” he repeated. “His name is Christian Meier.” We watched the man approach the locker, open it, remove the bag without checking to see if there was anything inside, then walk out of the building.

“Stand down,” said Zep. “We want to see where he takes it.”

Macht and Reaper followed in one vehicle; Zep and I in another. We tailed him directly to the bank, and right before he walked inside, the three of us intercepted him.

I was fluent enough in Swiss German to understand that when Macht approached, saying he needed to speak with him regarding his possession of stolen goods, the man agreed willingly. Then again, Macht’s six-foot-seven-inch and eighteen-stone frame likely scared the hell out of the guy, who didn’t look to be more than five feet ten and half the agent’s weight.

“Let us look in the bag,” Zeppelin said in English.

“This is private property,” Meier responded, clutching it closer to him.

Macht flashed his Swiss intelligence ID. “If you prefer, I can contact the cantonal police, or we can conduct this interview without involving local authorities.”

Meier studied him for a few seconds, then invited us to join him in his office.

“Open the bag, sir,” Macht said once the door was closed behind us.

“Who are they?” he asked in Swiss German.

I removed the ID Nem had given me, and Zeppelin did the same. Both were MI6 credentials. Mine read Elise Evans, and his was in the name of Jack Evans.

“What about him?” the banker said, looking at Macht and pointing at Reaper.

“He’s my bodyguard,” he told him. Apparently, the man bought it since Reaper was even bigger than Macht.

“We’re investigating individuals who were recent visitors to your financial institution,” Macht began.

“Under Swiss law?—”

“I am sure you’ll agree, with the safety and security of the residents of Switzerland on the line, the cantonal judges will grant a comprehensive warrant. You can tell us what you know about one of your customers or all. The choice is yours.”

The man hesitated a few seconds, but when Zeppelin pulled out his mobile, he raised a hand. “I’ll tell you as much as I know.”

“I’ve asked you to open the bag twice,” Zep added, leaning forward in one of the three chairs Meier had pointed to when we entered the office.

“My instructions were to place the bag in a safe-deposit box.”

“Who gave you those instructions?” Zeppelin asked while I studied the man’s reactions. He was uncomfortable but not fearful.

“The customer’s name?” Macht pressed.

The banker hesitated, then smoothed his hair. “Jacob Novak.”

Macht held up his mobile. “Is this Mr. Novak?”

Meier nodded, confirming it was Godwin.

“Who arranged for what is in the bag to be stolen?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who is this man?” Macht asked, swiping to an image of the bodyguard he and Schön said had accompanied Godwin to this bank and BJB.

“Mr. Novak’s bodyguard.”

“His name?” I asked.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“He was never introduced.”

“How long has Mr. Novak been a customer of your bank?” I continued.

His discomfort turned into annoyance.

“The lady asked you a question,” said Zeppelin.

“Many years,” Meier responded, looking directly at Zep, who then looked at me.

“Be more specific,” I added.

The man’s eyes darted between Macht and Zeppelin, visibly apprehensive about my interrogating him.

I stood, put my hands on his desk, and leaned forward. “I asked you a question, Meier, and I expect an answer. I also expect you to look at me when you deliver it.”

The man’s gaze met mine. “I would have to look up how long he’s held accounts at BJB.”

“Approximately?”

“Longer than I’ve been here.”

“Which is?” With each question, the volume of my voice increased.

“Nine years.”

Something else occurred to me. “How many accounts does Novak keep at your institution?”

Meier reverted to looking between Macht and Zeppelin rather than at me. Not only had I had enough, but the bank manager didn’t appear to be intimidated by either man. I made it my mission to ensure I made him exceedingly uncomfortable.

“How many?” I shouted, slamming his desk with my fist.

“Mr. Novak doesn’t directly own any accounts at BJB.”

I turned to Macht. “Get the warrant.”

He nodded and swiped the screen of his mobile, then stood, as did Zeppelin.

“Wait!” Meier said, his voice raised like mine was.

I glanced over my shoulder. “You have one more chance to be forthcoming. If you are not, we will obtain a warrant.”

“Mr. Novak makes deposits on behalf of one of our customers. Actually, two now.”

“How often?”

“There is no set pattern, but in the last year, it has been more infrequent. Prior to that, it was once per month.”

Probably due to his house arrest. “For now, we’re only interested in your confirmation of one of the customers Mr. Novak represents.”

He nodded.

“AMPS.”

Where before he'd looked uncomfortable and apprehensive, now he turned deathly pale at the mere mention of the organization's acronym.

15

ZEPPELIN

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

Verity questioned the bank manager about the ownership of the AMPS account as well as Jacob Novak's affiliation with the organization. None of us were surprised when he responded he wasn't privy to that level of information. We knew better than to threaten to get a warrant at that point, given no Swiss judge, regardless of whether we said national security was at risk, would consider demanding the bank reveal anything more to us unless we could prove the threat was viable.

We were about to leave when I remembered Verity had taken photos of the woman Godwin, aka Novak, was with at the fondue restaurant. When she pulled out her mobile and showed him, he tried hard to mask his reaction, but like it was with the mention of AMPS, his expression was one of outright fear. He said he didn't know her name, and I believed him. However, that he'd so obviously recognized her resulted in me moving her up on the list of persons of interest.

We left the meeting without demanding Meier turn over the listening device since there was only an empty box in the bag. It would be better to allow him to put it in the safe as instructed, then have Macht and Reaper surveil the bank to see if anyone showed up to get it.

While they remained on stakeout, Verity and I returned to the chalet, where we requested a videoconference with Nemesis and anyone else she wanted to include. In her response, she suggested we treat it like a briefing and all those present at the command center participate.

Given it was scheduled for thirteen hundred, it would allow Verity and me time to prepare notes and outline objectives.

“Besides Mithras and Pharaoh, Godwin seems like our best lead in finding AMPS,” I said when we sat at the table to get started.

“Agreed. However, I don’t believe he is either A or S.”

“I don’t, either. Especially in light of the way Meier reacted to the mention of the acronym.”

She nodded. “Novak, err, Godwin certainly didn’t appear to terrify him in the same way.”

“We need to find the bastard,” I muttered.

“As far as I’m concerned, that should be our primary objective.”

Verity and I split the topics we’d prepare for the briefing. I gathered information outlining what had taken place prior to this morning while she reported on today’s events. Once we were both finished, we traded files to add anything missing.

“I’ll admit that collaboration isn’t bothering me as much as I thought it would.”

I looked up at her. “Maybe because it’s with me.”

She smirked. “Don’t let it go to your head, Zeppelin.”

“Too late.”

Verity smiled, taking my breath away and making me want to reach up, cup her cheek, tell her how beautiful she was, then lean in to kiss her. As much as I wanted to, I didn’t do any of those things. We were working, and Verity was fucking good at what she did. I’d show her the respect she deserved.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

When I raised my eyes, she was studying me. “How amazing you are.”

She cocked her head and smirked. “Come on, tell me what you’re really thinking.”

“Precisely that.”

“Okay, so you don’t want to tell me. I can accept it.”

I couldn’t help myself. “Let me tell you my exact train of thought. In fact, I’ll demonstrate.” I did everything in order, from cheek-cupping to telling her she was beautiful, to the kiss, and finally said, “You’re so fucking good at what you do, and I want to show you the respect you deserve.”

I supposed, this time, my response to her doubt was compelling enough that she believed me. When she smiled, I wanted to start the process all over again.

“Ready?” she asked, checking the time, then hitting send on the single brief she’d combined from the two we’d prepared.

“I am.” I opened my computer, then muted the sound to prevent feedback from Verity and me sitting in such close proximity.

“Good afternoon,” said Nemesis, initiating the conference and positioning her screen in such a way that we could see all those in the room. “We’ve got most of the crew here, sans Poseidon and Oleander, who should arrive at any moment.”

If she hadn’t said they were on their way, I would’ve suggested we wait until Oleander, at least, could be present. As far as AMPS was concerned, she was the expert, regardless of how much she’d tried to bring the rest of us up to speed.

“Verity, we received your brief and are reviewing it now.”

“While everyone else is reading, let me tell you what I’ve been able to piece together,” said Decker. “First, Godwin’s anklebracelet was functioning just fine without him; thus, someone knew how to disable part of it while still maintaining the signal transmission.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

That news didn't come as a surprise to me.

“Next, and this is why I used the phrase ‘piece together.’ I’m having more trouble than I usually do, tracking Godwin. There were multiple private flight plans filed and planes that took off from both Zurich and Milan around the time he would’ve arrived at either airfield. One thing I know for certain is he didn’t fly commercial either in or out. I’ve tracked everyone coming and going from both locations. I’ll expand my search while I wait for more intel.”

“Copy that,” both Verity and I responded.

“I’ll tell you now, my hunch is he traveled to Dubai. I just need to confirm it.”

There were at least two reasons why Decker’s hunch made sense. First, the UAE’s extradition treaties with both the US and the UK were convoluted at best.

Second, it was a hotbed for high-end sex trafficking—AMPS’ forte. In my opinion, they engaged in the sale of every form of slave labor. They’d take any human they could get their hands on, then profit from the life they didn’t believe had any other value. I doubted they thought of their victims as anything more than animals.

“Let’s talk about Xavier Vella for a moment,” suggested Nemesis. “What’s your theory, Verity?”

“With all due respect, I’ll let Zeppelin respond.”

Nemesis nodded.

“I keep going back to his motive for killing Mithras. I’m unclear on our supposition; thus, I’m having a hard time buying that it was to rescue his grandmother or even to exact revenge for what was done to his girlfriend.”

“I agree,” said Oleander, who’d walked in with Poseidon. “Go on, Zeppelin,” she added.

“As we said in the brief, I—we—think it makes more sense that Vella was trying to silence Mithras.” I looked at Verity, who nodded.

I watched Oleander to see if she would add anything. Just as I was about to move on to a different topic, she stood and paced.

“O?” prompted Nemesis.

Oleander looked over to where Cayman was seated with Bexli. “It’s a theory, the ramifications of which are far-reaching.”

Bexli had gone from victim to a woman who’d recently completed her training to join SIS, and I admired the hell out of her for it. While she had an interview scheduled with Pinch Fulton for a job with MI5, now that he was interim chief at MI6, I wondered if he’d consider her for the international unit. Had anyone asked, I would have said that was where she’d be the most effective.

Like Oleander, Bexli stood. “The most difficult thing for me to accept is that Nonna Vella would have anything to do with AMPS or any human trafficker. The woman saved my life, and honestly, I consider her my family. We’re taught to listen to our instincts, and mine are screaming that Nonna Vella is exactly who she presents herself to be.”

Those in the room, Verity, and I all nodded.

“If there is anyone in the room who disagrees, please share your opinion.”

There were murmurs as people shook their heads, but otherwise, no one spoke up.

“Xavier was kind to me, but I agree with Zeppelin and Verity that him killing Mithras when he did makes no sense. Except...”

“Go on,” encouraged Cayman.

Bexli looked around the room. “He was very protective of me. Even when Cayman arrived and I told him it was okay, he was wary.” She hesitated.

“What else, Bex?” Cayman reached up and took her hand.

She looked down at him. “I think seeing the woman he loved after being beaten nearly to death, then seeing Mithras ready to shoot his grandmother, is enough for Xavier to kill the man. I know that if I were there and I had a gun, I would’ve killed Mithras. It wouldn’t have mattered to me if an army was there to do it. I would’ve wanted to do it myself.”

She made a good point, but as she said, we were trained to trust our instincts. I didn’t know exactly why I was suspicious of Xavier outside of the feeling I had. “What about his aunt, Charlene Vella-Borg?” I asked.

“Charlene Vella-Borg gave me the creeps from the moment I saw her. When our eyes met, I thought she’d definitely toss me into the street if Nonna wouldn’t have stood between her and me.” She shrugged a shoulder. “What kind of person drugs other women who are chained to beds and beaten within an inch of their lives? I cannot accept that she didn’t realize what was going on, and I also don’t buy she helped me escape.”

Wren spoke up. “At the very least, I suggest we assign a team to take a closer look into the Vella family and see if there’s any past history between them and Mithras. One thing I find interesting is that Pharaoh was working at the embassy at the time of Francesca’s abduction. If there was bad blood between Xavier and Mithras, one would think he would’ve recognized her, maybe even interacted with her.”

I agreed. It was Bexli who’d identified an embassy employee as being one and the same as Pharaoh. By then, the woman was in the wind, but at least, we were able to confirm what she looked like.

“As far as where we are in St. Moritz, I believe we should be hot on Godwin’s tail over remaining here,” said Verity. “We’ve yet to visit the second bank, however.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“While I’m waiting on information about Godwin, I’ll have a conversation with Rile about the Vella family. I want to make him aware of our suspicions, but my opinion is it would be prudent to keep them where we can find them, if you catch my drift. It’s his call, though.”

Decker, along with Rile, was one of the founding partners of the Invincibles. Their group was one of the two best private security and intelligence firms I’d ever worked with. The other was K19 Security Solutions, Doc Butler’s team. While they were rivals when it came to one-upping the other, they’d worked jointly on several international missions.

I agreed it had to be Rile’s call regarding any risk to his family. I didn’t know him well, but based on the interactions I’d had or witnessed, I doubted he’d suggest the Vellas relocate. If anything, I’d predict he’d have Decker—considered one of the top experts in intelligence technology in the world—create stronger security within his compound.

Decker cleared his throat. “Assuming we believe the Vellas need to remain under the coalition’s protection.”

Nemesis stood. “If our working theories prove correct, there are still two key players in AMPS who we have not yet identified. Given Mithras and Pharaoh are both dead, the threat of retaliation doesn’t just remain; it has increased. We will act with an abundance of caution with the Vella family and with everyone involved in the AMPS investigation.”

Those in the room either nodded or verbally expressed their agreement.

“Verity, I’d like to suggest you consider visiting UBS while you’re waiting for word on Godwin,” Nemesis added.

“Roger that,” she responded.

“Oh, and, Verity?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“I’m concerned about your cover after your experience this morning at BJB.”

“As am I. I’m prepared for other disguises.”

I wondered what she’d have in store for me and thought about her comment about the muscles in my arms. “It’s easier to add than take away,” she’d said. My eyes met hers over our laptops. Was she thinking about the same thing? It so often seemed like we were on the same wavelength.

After agreeing we’d touch base again as soon as Decker heard anything about Godwin’s twenty, we got ready to visit the bank.

“Have you ever worn contacts?” she asked.

“When I was younger, before I had the surgery to correct my vision.”

“Do you think you could again?”

“It’s like riding a bike, right?”

Verity laughed. “Yes, well, nothing like that.” She prepped them, then handed the case to me. “We have options if this won’t work.”

I had no trouble popping them in. Next was a wig and makeup.

“Would you mind terribly if I looked through your clothing?”

“Can I look through yours?”

I winked when she first looked stunned, but then smiled.

My mobile rang with a call from Decker. I answered and put it on speaker.

“We’ve got eyes on Godwin. There’s a helicopter waiting and a plane on standby in Zurich. Leave as soon as you can. Macht and Reaper will travel with you. I’ve already made contact with them. They’re waiting at the resort’s helipad.”

“The resort has a helipad?” I asked.

I don’t know if he didn’t hear me or didn’t find it necessary to answer such a stupid question. Of course it did. Otherwise, why would he have said it?

I thanked him and ended the call.

Verity was already gathering her things. “Sorry about all this,” she said, motioning to my face, which I hadn’t seen yet. I walked over to the mirror.

“Good God, I look like my dad.” I shuddered. “You couldn’t have made me look a little, err, sexier?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

Verity grinned. “That would be impossible, Henry.”

16

VERITY

Decker gave the four of us access to track Godwin’s movement during the six-hour flight. It would continue once we were on the ground in Dubai.

For the last three hours, it appeared he hadn’t left his suite in one of the city’s nicest hotels. According to Decker’s sources, he wasn’t just in a suite; he’d booked the penthouse.

Somewhat miraculously, Decker had also managed to get me access to view the assets of BJB’s largest accounts. While all of them were registered under shell corps, five listed Jacob Novak as an administrator—including the two belonging to AMPS. The three others were owned by FDI-Italia-ndr.

I was baffled that Godwin hadn’t chosen different aliases for each group of assets he administered. Did he really think a single alias would protect him? On the other hand, he could very well have more we hadn’t yet discovered and, thus, many accounts in total. I thought about Meier’s reaction when Macht had asked for Godwin’s name. He’d smoothed his hair, but his eyes remained steady.

We believed AMPS to be one of the largest traffickers in the world, but three of the other accounts Godwin oversaw, all owned by FDI-Italia-ndr, were worth a hundred times as much and had been in existence years longer than the ones we’d found in

Mauritius.

“What are you thinking about?” Zeppelin leaned in and asked. He didn’t need to, given we, along with Macht and Reaper, had the entire plane to ourselves. He also didn’t need to sit beside me for the flight’s duration, but I was glad he had.

“Meier’s response when you asked who instructed him to retrieve the bag from the ski area and put in a safe-deposit box. He hesitated, but I don’t think it was because he was stalling. Instead, my theory is Godwin has additional aliases.”

“I agree.”

“Which means he could be making deposits on behalf of many of the large asset holders. Hypothetically, many of them could be traffickers—or worse.” The idea had me so angry I could hardly think and sad to the point of tears at the same time.

“Cross-referencing them with the administrators listed could give us new leads.”

God, that we were onto something sickened me. When I joined the coalition, I knew our work would never be done. Once we took down AMPS, another heinous organization would rise in its place. Sometimes, it seemed that the number of vile, disgusting people in the world far outnumbered those who were good and decent, honest and hardworking, who cared for their fellow man and worked to fight against those who threatened the innocent. Like Zeppelin.

He could’ve chosen another assignment, remained in private intelligence even though it was, in his words, boring. Instead, he decided to lead one of the five UN task forces whose sole purpose was to put an end to human trafficking.

I hadn’t realized my hand was gripping the armrest until he took it in his and brought it to his lips. “Such eternal verities as honor, love, and patriotism...” he murmured,

caressing my palm with his thumb. “You are all that is good and true, honest, caring, and selfless.”

“I was thinking the same about you,” I confessed. “I cannot imagine living in a world without you and the others in the coalition.”

He squeezed my hand. “There’s something I need to say to you.” He let go and cupped my cheek. “You may think I’m crazy. crazier than you already thought, but I mean this from the bottom of my heart. I cannot imagine living in a world without you, Alena.” He leaned in and kissed me. “I’m beginning to think Z possesses magical powers.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Who, other than him, could’ve predicted we wouldn’t rip each other’s eyes out in the first twenty-four hours?”

I nodded.

Zeppelin closed his eyes, shook his head, and grinned.

“What?”

“Magnet.”

I cocked my head. “What about him?”

“He knew.”

“I’m not following. Knew what?”

“Shortly after Nemesis announced the op, I asked him what in the bloody hell I was going to do. He said, ‘Figure out a way to keep your hands off her.’ While, on the surface, that may sound like a typical juvenile, misogynistic-arsehole thing to say, he didn’t mean it that way.”

I had to cover my mouth from laughing out loud.

“I know what you’re thinking.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“Do you? Well, I’ve definitely changed my mind.” As soon as I said the words, I realized he had absolutely no idea what I meant. “Come on, Zeppelin, I know you thought I was a bitch. Admit it.”

“Misogynistic? Is that what you really thought of me?”

“Maybe a little?”

He had the pouty, puppy-dog eyes look on his face.

“But I was wrong. Very, very wrong,” I said in the sincerest yet playful voice I could muster.

“And you’re sorry?”

I was having a hard time not giggling, but I managed. “Yes. I’m sorry.”

“I know a few ways you could make it up to me.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but he silenced me with a kiss.

“After the op is over,” he said, smirking. “Now, we need to get back to work.”

My eyes scrunched. “You’re a rascal. But you’re also right.”

“Where do you want to start?”

“With Mithras.” I opened the first brief where I remembered the name mentioned. It had been scrawled in the dirt on the bottom of a container where ten trafficking victims were intercepted in the Port of Felixstowe. Nine other containers were liberated at the same time.

“The word Mithras had no meaning to us then,” said Zeppelin, reading along as I skimmed the brief.

“Then it became personal with Bexli’s abduction.”

He nodded. “It was during the briefing where the members of the coalition first saw a photo of Mithras.”

“Right. Cayman recognized him from a photo Bexli had sent.”

“That’s when we found her on the sex-slave auction website,” Zeppelin added. “You were the one who determined the IP’s origin was at a villa on Gozo. That’s when I first remember hearing the acronym AMPS.”

“At which point, Oleander became more involved.” I rested my head against the seat and closed my eyes.

“What’s up, Ver?”

“There are three accounts belonging to the shell corp FDI-Italia-ndr.”

“The acronym FDI is commonly accepted to mean foreign direct investment, the driving force of underground economies.”

“Italia obviously indicates an Italian origin, but what about ‘ndr’? I feel as though it should be obvious. Wait. Itisobvious.”

Zeppelin raised a brow. “It is?”

“The ‘Ndrangheta. They’re one of the largest and most sophisticated criminal organizations in the world. It’s estimated the syndicate brings in sixty billion US dollars annually. Which, by the way, is more than the GDP of many countries.” I continued reading. “While their investments are quite diverse—from legal enterprises to typical criminal activities, like fraud and extortion—they are also major players in both human and weapons trafficking.”

“Godwin is involved with some very dangerous people,” Zeppelin said under his breath. “It makes you wonder if he isn’t a fuck of a lot smarter than we think.”

“Crazy like a fox, as they say.”

He nodded.

“With power, though, comes arrogance. I remember Poseidon saying his father told him many in the diplomatic core believed Godwin was dirty for years but could never pin anything directly on him.”

“Power equals arrogance equals sloppiness.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

My eyes met Zep's. "He's gotten lazy."

He nodded. "Which means his days are numbered. Either the justice department will catch up with him, or one of the organizations he works for will."

"I'm sure Decker has access to global facial recognition systems, but maybe we should mention a possible 'Ndrangheta connection. It might help identify the woman we saw with him at the restaurant," I suggested.

"I agree. That may lead somewhere. However, I can't say the same about the alleged bodyguard traveling with him. Whoever he is, he's smart enough to conceal everything that would make him identifiable."

Zeppelin was right. He did everything I would've done. He wore dark glasses, a nondescript black suit and hat, kept his hands in his pockets, and was very well aware of surveillance cameras, knowing exactly how to position himself so his face was obscured. If only there was something that stood out as different or unique. I continued studying the few images we had of the man, but I didn't see anything.

"We'll be landing soon," said Zeppelin. "It doesn't appear Godwin has made a move."

He was right. For the last six hours, he'd remained in the same place. Not only hadn't he left, but it also appeared he hadn't moved much inside the suite. "Taking care of billions of dollars belonging to the world's worst criminals must be exhausting."

Zeppelin looked over at the tracker on my screen. "Gotta be asleep. Let's hope he

stays that way until we get there.”

“Either that, or he’s dead.”

Zeppelin’s eyes met mine, and he nodded.

17

ZEPPELIN

With an economy second only to Saudi Arabia in the Middle East, the United Arab Emirates was powerful. It was also teeming with billionaires whose asset accumulation was believed to be driven by criminal behavior and corruption. Thus, MI6 had a vast network of agents, informants, and other assets in Dubai as well as in all of the UAE.

By the time our plane landed, a support team of operatives had been put in place, some of whom I’d met during previous missions. Reaper facilitated transport from the airport to the hotel where Godwin was staying. Once there, Reaper, Macht, Verity, and I were instructed to meet on a utility floor, where we’d don tactical gear prior to raiding the penthouse.

Reaper and two other agents would enter the area first, clearing rooms. Macht was assigned to the second team, which would follow immediately behind them, providing backup. Verity and I were in the third group whose primary mission was apprehending Godwin.

That there wasn’t a direct-access elevator to the penthouse worked in our favor as did the time of night. It was close to twenty-three hundred hours when we were in position outside the penthouse door. Having secured an access card to the suite, it all felt far more civilized than most of the previous raids I’d conducted, many of which

were in makeshift desert compounds.

The danger, though, was on the same level or higher. The type of people Godwin did business with wouldn't hesitate to kill the lot of us.

"My count of three," Reaper said through the comms.

The door's lock clicked, and the first team moved in, securing rooms and issuing all clears as they went. The second team entered precisely three minutes later.

"Zep, Verity, you better get in here," Reaper said moments before we were supposed to enter anyway.

An MI6 agent I didn't know was waiting right inside and pointed toward the back of the suite. When we got to the room, Reaper stood over a body.

"It's Godwin," he reported. "Looks to be an execution-style murder."

His body was on its side, arms bound behind him.

"The bullet entered through the back of the skull," said Macht, kneeling. Another agent was searching for bullet fragments or casings.

"We've cleared every other room," someone else reported.

"Get the forensics team over here. We've got a probable murder weapon," said Verity, crouching on the floor and pointing near the edge of a sofa.

"Old-school mob hit," I said, walking over to her.

She nodded. "Those who don't subscribe to Locard's exchange principle."

“Every contact leaves a trace.”

“Once again, arrogance.” She stood and glanced at Godwin’s body. “I saw this coming. The indictment alone put him at risk.”

Page 62

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“I’d say he would’ve been better off remaining under house arrest, but that would’ve made him a sitting duck.”

We stood to the side and watched our forensics team process the crime scene. “Should we contact the US Embassy American Citizen Services to make arrangements for the body to be returned to the States?” Verity asked.

“We should not.”

“But we should contact Nemesis.”

While she didn’t phrase it as a question, I nodded.

We walked into the main area of the suite, then Verity pulled out her mobile and put the call on speaker.

“We’ve found Godwin,” she reported when Nemesis answered.

“Deceased?” I heard her respond.

“Affirmative.”

“I had a feeling.”

“It looks like a mob hit, or it was staged to look like one, anyway. I have a theory about a group whose assets Godwin managed in Switzerland. He used the same alias, Jacob Novak, for their accounts as well as the new ones set up for AMPS.”

“Before we talk about that, any sign of either the bodyguard or the woman?” she asked.

“Negative. The team is still processing the crime scene. We’ll let you know if there’s a trace of anyone other than Godwin,” I said.

“I’ve made arrangements for you to remain at the hotel where you are at least until evidence has been gathered. MI6’s UAE team of agents is available for whatever support you need.”

“Much appreciated, Nem,” I said, noticing Macht was waiting to speak with me.

While Verity wrapped the call, he led me to the other side of the room, closer to the body. The corpse had been moved in such a way that the blood covering the front of his torso was apparent, as well as knife wounds to his face.

“It appears he was tortured prior to being shot,” said Macht.

I leaned down to take a closer look.

“What is it?” Verity asked.

“Looks to me like the letter N,” I said in a quiet voice.

She nodded.

“We’re ready to transport,” said Reaper. Early in his career with the CIA, he’d led what we referred to as a cleaning crew. Rumor was, it often times involved victims who were near death and his was the last face they saw—hence his code name.

“Get it done,” I responded and he nodded. “Macht, you come with us.”

Before we left the penthouse, I found the man in charge of the MI6 unit and asked him to alert me when he had a report prepared. He handed off key cards for two suites, one for me and one for Verity.

“Reaper?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Did you find a mobile on Godwin?”

“Negative.”

His response didn't surprise me. “What about Ashford? Have you received any word on whether he's been able to find anything on Godwin's mobile number or call history?”

“Not yet, sir.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

I nodded. "I'll follow up with him directly."

Verity, Macht, and I left the penthouse and went to the room I'd been assigned, which was adjoined to Verity's.

"I'll start a brief," said Verity, pulling her laptop out of her bag.

"Copy that," I said before turning to Macht. "There's something I'd like to discuss with you."

"Yes, sir?"

"As you're aware, Schön was temporarily assigned to the Swiss task force of the UN Coalition Against Human Trafficking. She has now transitioned to a different team. Would you be interested in joining the coalition?"

His eyes widened. "I would, sir."

"Happy to hear it. I'm anticipating we'll be returning to the command center once our work here is finished. Would you be able to make that trip with us?"

"The life of an intelligence agent is one of a nomad," he said, shaking my outstretched hand. "I appreciate the opportunity, sir."

"That'll be all for now."

"I'll return to the penthouse to see what I can assist with."

“You made a good call, asking him to join your unit,” said Verity. “I would’ve made the suggestion.”

Part of me wondered if I should’ve mentioned it to her ahead of speaking with Macht.

“Verity, I, um...”

She looked up at me and grinned. “Your task force, Zeppelin. Not mine.”

“How did you know what I was going to say?”

The grin turned into a smirk. “Hmm. Do you, by any chance, know what I’m thinking right now?”

I took a step closer. “It’s a tossup between how much of a wanker you think I am and how badly you want to kiss me.”

She closed the distance between us, leaned up, and right before she planted her lips on mine, said, “Both.”

I would’ve deepened the chaste peck she gave me, but we were interrupted by Verity receiving a call from Nemesis.

“Hello, Nem,” she answered. “Zeppelin is here with me. Okay to put the call on speaker?”

“Of course. Hello, Zep.”

“Have you had a chance to review the brief?” Verity asked.

“Yes, and I wanted to let you know we’ve managed to get our hands on the hotel’s

security footage. There's a fifteen-minute gap where the camera malfunctioned, aka was disabled. That is likely when the murder took place."

"Roger that," she responded.

"Did Decker have any success looking into Godwin's mobile calls?" I asked.

"Both burner phones, but he's still working on finding the other caller's location at the very least. In the meantime, what's your theory?"

I listened as Verity explained her thoughts about who owned the three other accounts Godwin managed at BJB.

"The 'Ndrangheta? Interesting."

I raised my hand slightly, and Verity nodded for me to go ahead.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“There are signs the victim was tortured prior to being shot and killed. The team is photographing the body now, but one wound stuck out as significant. It appears the letter N was carved into Godwin’s cheek.”

“Which could go along with the theory that the murder was staged to look like a mob hit. What we need to figure out now is if someone—meaning AMPS—killed Godwin and set it up to look like it was a ‘Ndrangheta hit. Or if they struck on their own.”

“Both had something to lose from Godwin identifying his relationship with them via a common alias,” said Verity.

“Hold one moment,” said Nem. We heard muffled voices in the background. “Sorry. I’m back. According to Ares, a man who recently came to work for K19 Security Solutions has experience with the ‘Ndrangheta. I’ll reach out to Doc Butler now. Anything else?”

“One more thing,” I said.

“Go ahead.”

“I’ve asked Lars Persson—Macht—to join the Swiss task force.”

“Excellent news, Zep.”

Nem’s effusive response surprised me. “Do you know Macht?”

“Only by reputation. However, my understanding is he’s an excellent agent.”

“I don’t see any reason for us to return to St. Moritz at this time, unless you do. As I said to him, we’ll likely return to Shere once we wrap things up here. He’s available to come with us.”

“Good. Keep me abreast of your progress.”

“One other thing, Nem. Godwin wasn’t on our radar, but he was on Marchand’s.”

“He would be, given they’re both in the diplomatic corp. I sense we’ve barely scratched the surface of Godwin’s nefarious activities. Magnet and Schön are working that investigation now. They’ll be traveling to the States to meet with Baissier. From there, I’m sending them on to DC.”

“As far as Godwin’s remains...”

“Yes, right. Wilder has an in with Dubai’s Department of Health. He’s made arrangements for the body to be delivered to the morgue to Vauxhall Cross whenever your team is ready to release it.”

Both Verity and I expressed our thanks, and Nem ended the call.

“What’s your gut telling you?” I asked.

“AMPS set up the ‘Ndrangheta.”

“As is mine.” I noticed Verity was biting her bottom lip. “What else is on your mind?”

“We’ll be returning to Shere in the next few hours.”

I nodded. “You’ll have to tell me how you want this to play out.”

“Meaning what?”

“Are we a secret?” I walked over and put my arms around her waist.

“Are we awe?”

“I’d like us to be. At the very least, I want to see where this goes.”

Verity didn’t respond, but she didn’t pull away either, which I saw as a good sign.

“So, you didn’t answer my question.”

“Even if the two of us doing whatever we’re doing wouldn’t come as an utter shock to everyone in Shere, I’m still not sure I’d want to go public. That’s what I meant when I asked if we’re a we.”

“It won’t be easy to stop myself from touching you. However, I will respect your wishes to keep this private. For now.” I brushed her mouth with my thumb.
“Especially difficult will be to keep from kissing you when you bite your lip.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“I can’t tell if you’re joking.”

I raised a brow. “Of course you can, and I’m not. You know what I’m thinking at least half the time.”

“What about you? Do you know what I’m thinking?”

While she was trying to be flirtatious, I did know what she was thinking, and I didn’t like it one bit.

18

VERITY

The silly romantic in me wished Zeppelin and I could return to our chalet in St. Moritz and pretend we were equally crazy about each other. I knew once we returned to the command center where all of Zeppelin’s MI6 cronies were, his infatuation with me, my lips in particular, would quickly fade from memory. For him, anyway.

Me? I’d been sneaking glances at Zeppelin when I was certain no one was looking—especially him—since the day we met. The feelings of longing I had for him would increase exponentially now that I knew how it felt to kiss him, to have him suckle my breast, and press his hardness against me while his hands squeezed the cheeks of my bottom.

He’d joked that the animosity between us was a result of pent-up sexual frustration. He’d nailed it more than he realized, now that I allowed myself to think honestly

about my feelings for him. Somewhere deep inside, I knew Zeppelin would never look at me the way he had the last few days again. That same intuitive feeling told me that, once our flight landed at Gatwick, he'd remove the metaphoric rose-colored glasses he viewed me through now and look at me the way he saw me a few days ago—a woman he couldn't abide.

My heart wouldn't be broken, but it would hurt. Each time I gazed at him and he looked right through me would be like a knife in my chest.

Even when I threatened to call Nemesis and tell her the undercover mission and our pretending to be a newly married couple wasn't working, I didn't feel the same resolve I did now. I'd miss working with the other members of the coalition, Zeppelin especially, but I had to move on. It was time I reported to my new duty. I was a member of Unit 23. Any missions I participated in from now on needed to be for them.

“Verity?”

I looked into his eyes and realized Zeppelin was studying me. “Yes?”

Rather than speak, he moved his hands to the back of my thighs, lifted me, and took several steps, not stopping until my back was against the wall. With my legs around his waist, I could feel his rigid cock pressed against my pussy. He kept one hand on my arse, cupped my face with the other, then kissed me. More, his mouth made love to mine. An ache throbbed in my chest, thinking about how much I'd miss this. How much I'd miss the man I'd gotten to know the last few days. He was such a good man, so much better than I'd believed him to be.

He broke our kiss, his hand moved to my neck, and he tightened his grip. “Stop thinking about anything but this. Be present with me, Alena. Focus on how well our bodies fit together, as if we were made for each other. He trailed kisses from my

cheek and down my neck. “I cannot get the memory of the taste of your skin out of my mind, and I need more. So much more.”

“Zep—”

His mouth returned to mine, and he silenced me by pressing my lips open with his tongue. I’d never been kissed that way in my life, and soon, I never would be again.

“Did you not hear me, Alena? Do you not feel how fucking much I want you?”

“I cannot do this. We cannot,” I cried. The idea that the first time we made love would also be the last had me clinging to him, never wanting to let him go.

“This isn’t the end. I won’t let it be. I’ll respect your wishes that we not share what’s between us with anyone at the command center, but I will not let you go. Let this go. That’s what I cannot do.”

“Zeppelin—”

“Henry, dammit. Say it. Say my name.”

“Henry,” I cried as tears spilled onto my cheeks.

“Don’t let go of me,” he begged. “Don’t let go of us. I can feel you slipping away from me, and I can’t bear it.”

He kissed me again, as if his mouth on mine would convince me better than his words did.

“Please,” he said against my lips. “Please, Alena. Don’t leave me.”

I turned my face and rested my cheek against his. “It’s you who will leave me.”

He shook his head, grinding his hardness against the throbbing need between my thighs. “This is what you do to me. I’ve never felt desire like I have for you. I need you like I need my next breath. I’ve never begged a woman for anything in my life, but I’m pleading with you now. Let me make love to you, Alena.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. “And once you do, the need will go away.”

“Never. My need for you will never diminish.”

Page 66

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“You can’t say things like that to me. When you do, I so want to believe you. And then...”

“Will it be enough for you? Just once? If you think it will be, then we won’t be making love. We’ll be fucking. Fucking doesn’t mean anything. You can walk away from fucking and not be tempted to look back. Is that how you feel about me?”

I shook my head.

“Say it.”

“That isn’t how I feel.”

“Because if it is, my heart will be broken.”

I looked into his eyes. “It isn’t.”

This time when he kissed me, he turned my body so it was no longer pressed against the wall. His powerful arms held me close, and I clung to him, knowing things between us were about to change. My life would never be the same. Even if it turned out this was the only time our bodies would be joined together, it would be worth it. For the rest of my life, I’d carry the memory of the first time I made love with someone. Every time before had been just sex. Just fucking. Fucking, you could walk away from and never look back.

Zeppelin—Henry—rested my body on the bed. As soon as our bodies no longer touched, I felt empty, lost, so alone. I reached out for him. “I need you,” I whispered.

He lay beside me and pulled my body against his. "I'm right here."

"Don't stop touching me."

"Never, if you'll only let me."

"Henry."

He closed his eyes and shuddered. "Do you know what it does to me when you say my name?"

"Henry," I repeated, breathing the word more than saying it. "My Henry." At least for now. For today. Forever in my memory.

19

ZEPPELIN

When Alena called me hers, I had to hold myself back from tearing the clothes from both our bodies and sinking my cock into her. In so many words, I'd told her we'd be making love. I needed it to be that way as much as I wanted it. I hadn't lied when I said if she didn't want the same thing, I'd be heartbroken. There was nothing simple, nothing typical, not even anything familiar in my relationship with her. From the beginning, it was different. No one had driven me as crazy as she had. The times I'd felt like throttling her were met by an equal number that I wanted to fuck her senseless.

Except that wasn't what I wanted anymore.

I took my time, lavishing kisses on her mouth, face, and neck. I thought about the one and only time my lips had been on her nipples, dying for them to be there again, but I

forced myself to take this slow. To learn her body. To discover all the things that brought her pleasure. To hear her beg me for release. Beg me to feel me inside her.

“My Alena,” I whispered when my mouth was close to her ear, wanting her to feel the power of those words like I had. The way they’d coursed through my body, heating my blood, warming my heart, and setting my desire on fire.

I rolled with her so she was on her back, then snaked my hands under her pullover. Her skin felt so warm; I longed to know how it would feel pressed against mine.

“Wait.”

I froze, praying she wasn’t about to stop me.

“I have to be me,” she said, stroking the wig with her hand.

“Can I do it?”

Her brow was furrowed, but she nodded, removing the pins that held the wig in place. Together, we took it off. I looked into her blue eyes, made that way by contacts.

“Do you need to take those out?”

When she said she did, I started to move away, but she held onto me with one hand and reached for a tissue with the other. “They’re disposable,” she said, removing one, then the other.

“There you are,” I said, diving deep into the warmth of her eyes. I slid my hands back under her pullover, then pushed the cups of her bra out of my way.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

She reached down and removed everything covering her body from the waist up.

“Your turn. Except with you, everything off.” Her sultry smile, coupled with her words, sent me back to the place where I wanted to rip my clothes from my body.

I eased off the bed, pulling my shirt over my head, then lowering my trousers after toeing off my shoes.

“Mmm,” she moaned, reaching out when my erection jutted out in front of me.

“No touching until you’re naked too.” I moved to her feet and took off her sexy-as-fuck black booties, then pulled her jeans off her body when she unfastened them. I almost lost it when I saw her black lace thong. “Are you telling me you’ve been wearing thongs all the time I’ve known you? Good, God. I’ll never be able to look at your perfect arse again without immediately turning hard as stone.”

“Sometimes, I don’t wear any at all,” she teased when I spread her legs and crawled between them. “Like you.”

As I stared, stunned speechless, she untied one side of the lace. I quickly reached up and undid the opposite side. “These are my favorite knickers ever,” I said when they fell away from her body.

When I lowered myself and licked through her folds, Alena’s back arched. When I sucked on her sensitive bundle of nerves, she would’ve bucked if I didn’t have a tight grasp on her hips.

She wove her fingers in my hair and ground herself against my mouth. “Henry, please.” I eased one finger into her tight, wet heat, then added a second. The woman who made me mad with want came apart with my name on her lips.

I slowed the thrusts of my fingers and tongue as she stilled. I wanted to be inside her so bad it hurt, but I forced myself to wait until her eyes met mine.

“Henry,” she murmured, placing her palm on my cheek. I kissed the sensitive spot between her legs once more, then shifted my body up so my cock rested where my fingers had been. Leaning down, I nipped her bottom lip with my teeth, then eased the sting with my tongue. Alena raised her neck, and her mouth opened under mine. With the ravenous way she responded to me, I couldn’t wait any longer. I slowly moved inside her, stopping myself to allow her body to adjust to my size.

“More,” she mewled.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I half whispered, half groaned, barely holding on to the infinitesimal amount of restraint I still possessed.

“More,” she repeated, lifting her hips to force me to go deeper.

Whatever tiny amount of resolve I possessed was lost when she put both hands on my arse and pushed. I thrust hard, then stilled, focusing on how amazing my hardness felt wrapped in her warm, wet pussy. If I lived to be a hundred, I’d never forget this moment, staring into her eyes, kissing her, buried deep. It was all I could do to stop myself from professing my undying love for her.

Instead, I moved my mouth to her breasts, alternating between them as I slowly pulled almost all the way out of her, then slammed deep. I sucked her nipples harder, quickening my pace when her fingernails dug into the flesh of my shoulders. I shifted to the side of her breast, sucking her flesh until the mark I’d left was visible, then I

licked it. When she raised the upper half of her body, leaned up, and took my lower lip between her teeth like I'd done to her, I lost my mind. Whatever tenuous hold I had was long gone as I pounded my release, our eyes riveted on each other, her body matching mine, thrust for thrust—I exploded, emptying my unsheathed self into her and experiencing the most powerful orgasm of my life. Overcome by emotion, I buried my face in her neck.

Alena's arms tightened around me as she held me to her as I struggled with what to say. Should I tell her I regretted not donning a condom? If I did, it would be a lie as much as if I apologized for not pulling out before I came. I'd wanted to feel everything. So I did. If that made me a selfish bastard, so be it. If I had to do it over again, I'd not change a thing. The other thing I wouldn't do is allow her to pull away from me, physically or emotionally.

I felt her hand snake between us, instantly getting hard again when her fingers wrapped around me. As dizzy as I was after coming so hard, coupled with my immediate need to be sheathed again in her warmth, I fell to my back when she pushed me, and stared up at her beautiful face, watching how it changed as she took me back into her.

Resting one palm on the soft curve of her waist, I heard the words spoken from my lips before my brain engaged enough to stop me. "I'm never letting you go, Alena. You're mine now. Forever."

I stilled, holding my breath, so afraid of what she might say. When she smiled, leaned down, and kissed me, relief spread throughout my body as I exhaled the fear I'd held inside. Then I watched as she lost herself, building her own rhythm, taking what she needed, but never once letting her gaze stray from mine until her neck and back arched and she squeezed me so tightly, it felt like a vice.

I lifted my torso, held her against me, then took over, jackhammering into her until

we came together. This time, Alena buried her face in my neck. When I felt her warm tears, I knew nothing was wrong. She was overcome by the same emotion I was, yet not allowing herself to say the words we both believed couldn't yet be said. It was too soon. I knew that. I also knew the love I felt would continue to thrive and grow until the day I was certain she was ready to hear me speak the words.

20

VERITY

I held my breath, waiting for the awkward moment I'd convinced myself was coming, when Henry would become Zeppelin, like Cinderella's carriage turning into the pumpkin it once was. When regret for what we'd done would replace our overwhelming, all-encompassing desire.

Instead, he rolled my body and held me close, stroking my hair with one hand while his fingers toyed with one nipple, then the other. It felt possessive. Like, at any time, he'd touch me wherever he wanted because I was his.

The other thing I waited for were feelings of fear that I'd lost my mind by believing what was between us was more than an undercover-op hookup.

Henry's fingers moved to my chin, and he raised my face to look at him.

"That was mind-blowing," he said, giving me a soft kiss.

Thinking that meant "cuddle time" was over, I eased away. Or tried to. Our bodies were still touching when he tightened his grip.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“Um, nowhere?”

He smiled. “When you told me not to stop touching you, do you remember what I said?”

I shook my head, only realizing I was biting my lip when he leaned up and licked it.

“I said, ‘Never, if you’ll only let me.’ I’m guessing you didn’t believe me.”

“In that case, it’ll be difficult to keep, um, this private when we return to Shere.”

“And the reason I said, ‘if you’ll only let me.’ The minute you tell me you, like me, don’t care who knows, the moments when part of my body isn’t touching yours will be rare.”

I smirked. “You don’t mean it.”

His eyes scrunched. “Try me. Say the words, Alena.”

“What words?”

“You don’t care who knows.”

I tried to roll away, but he wouldn’t let me.

“Stop it,” I said.

“What should I stop?”

“Pretending this was more than?—”

He raised up so his face was close enough to mine for me to feel his breath. More, I could see the hurt in his eyes. “Don’t you dare say it.”

“Zeppelin—”

“Ah, I’m good ol’ Zep again, is that it? Or rather, Zep, who you can’t stand the sight of.”

“I never felt that way.”

His hand went to the back of my neck. “No, you liked to look, didn’t you?”

My eyes filled with tears. “Don’t make this ugly.”

“Me? You accused me of pretending this was something more than the words I couldn’t let you say. That was ugly, Verity.”

I tried to escape his clutches, but he wouldn’t ease his grip. “Let go of me.”

He shook his head. “I won’t.”

“Dammit, Zeppelin, let me fucking go.”

“Not until I do this.”

Like the first time, when the last thing I’d expected was for him to kiss me, he did it again. It was soft, gentle, so loving, so wonderful that I never wanted it to end, but it

did.

Zeppelin rested his forehead against mine. “That’s how I feel, Alena. That right there. You felt it too. I take that back. You feel it. If you try to tell me you don’t, I’ll know you’re lying. Fuck,” he swore when the sound of our mobiles’ alerts brought the conversation to an abrupt end. He loosened his arms, and I rolled away, stood, and padded to the other room naked.

As I grabbed my cell, I glanced up and saw him still in bed, one arm behind his head, staring at nothing.

“Zeppelin? Do you?—”

He got out of bed, but instead of walking toward me, he went in the opposite direction, slamming the bathroom door behind him.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“I just realized the hour in Dubai. I hope I didn’t wake you,” Nemesis said when I answered her call.

“Not at all.”

“Is everything all right?”

“Yes. Fine. Everything’s fine.”

“I see.”

“You don’t,” I snapped, immediately regretting it.

“Very well, I don’t.”

“I apologize.”

“Accepted. Now, I’ve called with an update.”

“Right. Go ahead.”

“While Decker has reached a dead-end tracking who Godwin was speaking with, he was able to determine the call’s origin.”

“Where?”

“Tropea.”

“In Calabria?” I gasped.

“That’s right.”

“The ‘Ndrangheta’s base is in Calabria.”

“Yes, Verity. Your theory about who’s behind FDI-Italia-ndr’s assets is proving correct or at least likely. Are you ready to go from the flame into the fire?”

As she spoke the words, I watched Zeppelin stalk in my direction. “I am.”

“Good. Talk it over with Zeppelin, and let me know how you’d like to proceed. My thinking is that rather than returning to Shere, you should go to Southern Italy.”

Naked, like me, he stood close enough for my hardened nipples to brush against his powerful pecs as our eyes bored into each other’s, close enough that he could hear every word Nemesis uttered.

“Agreed,” I said.

“New identities?”

“Yes, please.”

“Same cover?”

Zeppelin nodded.

“Yes.”

“Reaper and Macht will go with you, of course. Would you like for me to arrange

additional support? Poseidon could send Fucile and Sognatrice from the Maltese task force to meet you in Tropea.”

Zeppelin nodded a second time.

“That will be appreciated.”

“Very well. I’ll get back to you in the morning with the arrangements.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“Copy that. Thank you, Nem.”

I ended the call and set my mobile on the desk beside me. At the same time, Zeppelin wrapped his arm around my waist and closed what little space there was between our bodies.

“We need to talk.”

I raised a brow. “Talk?”

“Yes. We were interrupted in the midst of a conversation about the kiss we shared.”

“I don’t think it’s necessary for us to talk about it.”

I raised a brow a second time.

“Let’s talk about something else, then.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Too loudly, apparently, based on Zeppelin’s expression.

“You’ll like this conversation even less. You said I shouldn’t pretend this was more than...”

I nodded.

“A hookup?”

“Not exactly.”

“Good. Because it is more, Alena. A lot more. And, lucky for you, we’re headed to Tropea tomorrow rather than Shere, so I’ll have more time to prove it to you.”

“Zep?”

He raised a brow.

“By any chance, are you hungry?” I asked.

“Famished. Room service?”

“That would be perfect.” I pointed to my room. “I should probably go next door and shower...”

Zeppelin was shaking his head.

“I shouldn’t shower?”

“You’re not going anywhere. Give me your room key.”

“Why?”

“Decide what to eat, then we’ll bathe together.” He took my hand, led me into the bedroom, grabbed one of two robes that were on the bed, and held it out for me. He put on the other, handed me the room service menu, and left the room. Minutes later, I heard him knocking on the adjoining door and opened it.

“You should leave my things over there,” I said when he carried them into his suite. “It’s against Sharia law for an unmarried couple to share a room.” As soon as I said

it, I realized how ridiculous I sounded, given a short while ago, we'd found James Godwin shot in the head after having been tortured.

“What did you decide on?” he asked, ignoring my statement but looking over my shoulder at the menu.

“Everything sounds good. Well, apart from the camel burger.”

“I'll order for us. You run the water in the bath.”

I raised a brow, and he grinned.

“Come on, you really didn't fantasize about that in St. Moritz? Wait until you see this one. It's bigger.”

Page 71

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

I leaned up and kissed his cheek.

“Not that I mind, but what was that for?”

“Because sometimes you’re just far too cute to resist.”

“Sometimes?” I heard him say as I walked away.

He was right that the tub was bigger, but it was also far more luxurious, with multiple jets and two waterfall-type faucets on either side rather than on the ends, where there were built-in headrests.

Zeppelin walked up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders. “Nice, right?” He dropped his robe to the floor, then reached around me to undo the sash of mine before slipping it from my shoulders. He helped me into the tub, climbed in behind me, then pressed a button.

“What does that do?” I asked when the jets didn’t come on.

“Keeps the water warm.”

He pressed another button, and colored lights came on in the tub at the same time the room lights dimmed.

“Apparently, you’ve made use of one of these before.”

“Every day when I’m at home. Which, unfortunately, isn’t very often.”

I glanced over my shoulder. “You really have one of these in your flat?”

He shook his head. “In my house.”

I realized then how little Zeppelin and I actually knew about one another’s personal lives. “Where is your house?”

“Wargrave, right on the water.”

“That’s far more impressive than me owning a fancy espresso machine.”

“I’ll take you there when we return to England. It’s only an hour’s drive from London. It’s also an hour’s drive from Shere, although not exactly a direct route.” Zeppelin moved my hair and kissed my neck right below my ear. “You’ll love it there.”

“I would? What makes you say so?”

“There are views of the Thames from all the main rooms and floor-to-ceiling, glazed doors that lead out to the deck. The kitchen, which has a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree view, is quite spectacular.”

“It sounds lovely.”

“I’ve realized, though, it’s missing two things that are quite essential.”

“Two?”

“The aforementioned fancy espresso machine.”

“And?”

Zeppelin wrapped his arms around me. “You, there with me.”

I closed my eyes and relaxed against him. It was a nice thought, regardless of how unrealistic it seemed. A fantasy, really.

“That was quick,” Zeppelin said when we heard what sounded like a doorbell ring. He scooted me forward, got out of the water, and put on the robe he’d left on the floor. “Not a peep out of you, understood?” he said, leaning down to kiss me. “I’d rather not cause an international incident by the two of us being arrested.”

Once he walked out, I sunk deeper into the water, wishing he’d turned on the jets before he left. I’d experiment with the buttons, but then the hotel employee would probably guess there was someone in here.

“All set,” he said, dropping his robe in the same place on the floor and rejoining me in the water.

“Which one turns on the jets?” I asked.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“All of these.” He pointed to a panel with six different controls.

My eyes opened wide.

“Now, you know how I felt the first time I tried to use the espresso machine.”

While the water swirled around us, Zep and I relaxed against each other. He drizzled bodywash on my chest, then cupped my breasts, toying with my nipples until I began to writhe. I closed my eyes when he trailed both hands down between my legs. The weight from his powerful arms held me still as he brought me to another orgasm before lifting me, my back still to his front, and entered me from behind. Weightless in the water, I put my hands on either side of the tub and moved up and down on his cock. It wasn't long before Zeppelin put his hands on my waist, grinding as deep as he could inside me, and both of us hit the pinnacle again.

My body warred with wanting to eat or sleep. Filling my stomach won out when, after drying off and donning our robes, Zeppelin led me into the main room, where the food he'd ordered waited.

Once he lifted the silver domes to uncover margoogat—a spicy and tomato-y stew made with chicken—vegetable samboosas, and luqaimat for dessert, I was ravenous.

“Tell me about your family,” I said between bites of some of the best food I'd ever tasted.

“I have two brothers and one sister, all older and none of whom went into intelligence. One brother and my sister live in Wargrave, not far from my house. My

oldest brother, the one I'm closest to, lives in America. It was one of the reasons I requested the CIA assignment. Given he lives in California and I worked on the other side of the country, I didn't see him as often as I would've liked."

"What about your parents?"

"My father passed when I was eighteen. My mum lives in Wargrave, in a cottage on the same property where my sister and her family live. What about you?"

"I grew up in Primrose Hill. My parents were older and are now both deceased. I have one brother, but we aren't close."

I covered my mouth when I yawned, sleepier due to my now-full stomach.

"We should sleep," Zep said after we polished off all the food he'd ordered, including the luqaimat.

I pointed in the direction of the other suite. "Should I..."

"Regardless of where you sleep, I'll be with you, so you choose."

"You did bring my things over here," I said, covering my mouth when I yawned a second time. While it was zero two hundred in Dubai, it was three hours earlier in St. Moritz and four in London. Still, the last couple of days were so intense, my body had hit a wall of exhaustion.

After he'd moved the room service cart to the hallway, we dropped our robes and crawled into bed. Within what felt like seconds after he curled his body around mine, my back to his front, I was sound asleep.

ZEPPELIN

By the time I woke, later that morning, Nemesis had sent a brief stating Godwin's body was on the way to the UK. Our itinerary for the trip to Tropea was included, and she said Fucile and Sognatrice were headed to Calabria from Florence.

"Why didn't you wake me?" Verity asked, joining me in the main room, where I was checking emails and reading the brief.

I raised my arm from my side and motioned her closer. Her cheeks flushed, but she walked near enough for me to hug her. "I haven't been up long, and our flight isn't until sixteen hundred, so there was no reason not to let you sleep. Especially since I woke you so many times last night."

Her cheeks turned pink a second time, making me wish she wasn't wearing the robe and that her hair was down rather than up in a bun.

"The water should be hot in the electric kettle, and I also made coffee."

"No breakfast?" she said, winking.

"On its way."

"I was joking, but thank you." I watched her make her tea, paying attention to how she took it. "You're very sweet, Henry."

I grinned but stopped myself from saying she would've known that quite some time ago if she'd been nicer to me. On the other hand, I hadn't exactly been pleasant to her, either.

Had someone told me four days ago that Verity and I would be starting our morning

together after spending the night alternating between making love and sleeping in each other's arms, I would've called them a liar.

"We received a brief from Nemesis with information about our flight and accommodations in Tropea," I said instead of being contrary.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“Anything I need to read now, or can I enjoy my tea first?”

“Nothing urgent, but I’ll give you the quick rundown.” I told her about Godwin’s remains being on the way to the UK and that the two agents from the Maltese task force would arrive in the Calabrian coastal town before we did. “Nem’s made arrangements for us all to stay in a large former-patrician manor. It’s been renovated recently, and there are plans to open it as a hotel. In other words, private both outside and in.”

“Are you trying to say you’d like us to share a room?” she said, smiling.

“I’ve already called dibs on the penthouse.”

She chuckled and shook her head.

“What’s funny?”

“Sometimes you remind me of a little boy, and please know I mean that in the best possible way.”

“Are you referring to me pouting?”

She laughed again. “That and how excited you get about things.”

“Things? No. Being with you? Yes.”

The smile left her face, and she took another sip of tea, then set the cup on the table.

“It’s crazy, isn’t it? You and me?”

“I was thinking the same thing a few minutes ago.”

“I can’t remember what I didn’t like about you.”

This time, I was the one to laugh. “I’ll try not to do anything to refresh your memory.” My mobile pinged with an alert from Nemesis. Verity’s did too.

We picked them up and read the message at the same time.

“Brando Ripa? Have you heard of him?” she asked.

“His recent history is somewhat complicated, but he’s the man Nem mentioned had experience with the ‘Ndrangheta.”

“There’s a brief,” Verity muttered, swiping her screen. “It says he was released from prison a few months ago.”

I read the man’s background silently while she did the same. According to the information Nem sent, Brando Ripa had been arrested in Italy and charged with art forgery. However, given he was the half brother of Doc Butler’s daughter’s best friend, as well as in danger of retaliation from the ‘Ndrangheta, whose higher-ups were among those defrauded, Doc made arrangements for him to serve his sentence in the US. He also arranged for his early parole and hired him to work for K19 Security Solutions.

“This says he’ll be traveling with us from here, which explains why we’re taking a later flight.”

I nodded. “Also according to Doc, Ripa has trusted sources inside the ‘Ndrangheta

and can aid us in getting an audience, given our theory is that AMPS is setting them up for Godwin's murder."

Her eyes opened wide. "This says he paid them millions in restitution."

"I remember hearing something about the man's father being a billionaire."

Verity sat back in her chair. "Something tells me Doc Butler didn't stick his neck out for this guy just because he's the half brother of his daughter's best friend."

I agreed that there had to be more to the story and knew Doc well enough to contact him and ask. While I should check with Nem if she'd be opposed to me doing so, it was four hundred hours in Shere and twenty hundred in California, where Doc and his wife lived. If I waited until I heard back from her, I'd have to wait several hours to contact Butler.

However, before I could send the message, my mobile rang with a call from the woman.

"You're up early, Nem," I said.

"Yes. Listen, Zep, is Verity there?"

"Right here, as a matter of fact. Shall I put you on speaker?"

"Please." She paused for a moment, then continued. "I've picked up intel that may prove your theory about AMPS setting up the 'Ndrangheta. Footage from outside the hotel shows a man, whose description closely matches that of the bodyguard in St. Moritz, leaving the hotel last night around the time the coroner estimated the time of death. This has become a matter of urgency, because we've picked him up leaving the hotel again approximately thirty minutes ago. We're pulling footage from area

surveillance cams now. Be ready to mobilize.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“Roger that. You said leaving the hotel both times, but nothing of him entering?”

“Negative.”

As soon as the call ended, I rang Reaper and gave him the rundown of what we’d just learned.

“I can engage the MI6 team,” he offered.

“Please do. We’ll convene here in my suite at zero nine hundred. Will that give you enough time?”

“Affirmative,” he responded before ending the call.

At the same time, the room’s bell rang. “That will be breakfast.”

Verity ducked into the bedroom while I wheeled in the food I’d ordered rather than letting the delivery person come inside.

“All clear,” I said after making sure the man was well on his way in the opposite direction.

When Verity came out of the room, she was wearing most of her tactical gear.

“I should suit up,” I said, using my fingers to grab one of the pancakes I’d ordered. I tensed, wondering if Verity would give me shit about it, but I smiled when she did the same thing. Rather than going into the bedroom, I stopped in front of her, put my

hand on her upper arm, and kissed her.

“Not that I’m complaining, but what was that for?”

“I need to get as many in as I can while we’re alone.” Rather than let her go, I snaked my arm around her waist and gave her a proper toe-curling kiss.

When I let her go and walked away, a feeling of dread settled in the pit of my stomach. The last time I remembered a premonition as strong was the night several of us almost got blown up on Oleander’s yacht. As much as I wanted to ignore it, I couldn’t. My every nerve ending was on high alert.

Part of me wanted to tell Verity not to deploy, but two things stopped me. First, it would be showing her a terrible lack of respect. Second, she wouldn’t listen anyway.

When I came out wearing my gear, she caught me rubbing my chest.

“Everything all right?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I’ve got a bad feeling about his op.”

“I do too.” She looked down at her mobile. “Nem says they’ve tracked the bodyguard to the Dubai Marina.”

“Time to move out,” I said when I heard a knock at the door, and looked to see Reaper standing on the other side.

“We received Nem’s alert. Transport is waiting downstairs,” he said when I pulled it open.

“Hang on.” I closed the door when I felt Verity walk up behind me and pulled her

into my arms. “Stay alive, Ver.”

She nodded and kissed me. “Stay alive, Zep.”

“We’ve got overhead coverage,” she reported once we were loaded into one of the three waiting SUVs. “He’s backtracking, now headed north to Burj Al Arab.”

“He’s on his way to the helipad,” I warned, watching the same progress Verity was.

“Dammit,” she said under her breath.

“We’re closer. I can beat him there,” said Macht, who was behind the wheel.

Given we were coming from the opposite direction and the world-famous landmark was partway between the marina and the hotel we’d just left, there was a chance we’d arrive first.

While Macht careened in and out of traffic, Verity, Reaper, and I laid out a plan, assuming our theory was right that he was headed to Burj Al Arab.

“The hotel itself is fifty-six stories,” said Verity. “Three of which are underground parking areas. The helipad sits at the equivalent of three stories above the top floor.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

Reaper, who was on the comms with the MI6 team, marked out entry points and divided us into four groups of three.

When he separated Verity and me, I didn't argue. Macht would be with her, and I had to trust two things. First, she knew what she was doing. She was trained for this and more. Second, Macht would have her back.

"Faster," I urged, knowing the overheads could track the man we were searching for as long as he was outside the hotel, but once he entered, we'd have to wait to see if those in Shere could hack into the security camera footage to locate him.

We pulled into the lowest-level parking area of the hotel that was designed to look like the sail of a ship and had been built on an artificial island connected to the mainland by a private curving bridge.

Once parked, we split up. Two of the teams, mine and Verity's, headed to lifts on opposite sides of the building.

"Stay alive, Ver," I repeated through the comms.

She turned, faced me, and gave me a thumbs-up before rushing off with Macht and one of the MI6 UAE team members.

"Ready?" Reaper asked when I stood watching her go for a couple of seconds longer than I should have.

Once inside the car, another of the UAE team bypassed the lift block that required an

access card to reach the helipad and overrode the call button so we wouldn't stop on any other floors. We arrived at the top in a few seconds.

"Team one in position," I heard Macht say as I scanned the empty helipad from one of the few places where there was enough cover to remain hidden—which also meant I couldn't see where Verity was positioned.

Under two minutes later, I heard the thrum of the incoming blade and crouched down, ready to spring into action.

"Lift ascending," Macht said through the comms. I readied my weapon. "Three, two, one," he counted.

I could see a woman step out of the car. She was a few paces from it when I heard Verity shout, "Freeze and drop your weapon!"

"Sheka!" the woman spun around and screamed. She pulled out a gun, raised it, and got off two shots before my bullet hit her in the side and she fell to the ground.

I was already running toward the lift when I heard Macht shouting, "Man down! Man down!"

While I ran as fast as I could, it felt like slow motion once I saw two people on the ground. One was a man; the other, Verity.

The helicopter powered down behind me, and several people were yelling, but I couldn't hear what they were saying above the sound of blood rushing through my body.

As I ran toward her, Reaper sprinted past me in the opposite direction. Maybe the woman was still alive. Maybe she still had the gun. I didn't care. Nothing could stop

me from getting to Verity, even being shot.

“There’s a lot of blood,” Macht said, holding something under Verity’s arm to stop the flow.

“We’ve got transport!” Reaper shouted, racing toward us.

I put my arms beneath her while Macht held a cloth against her wound.

“The pilot is unarmed. He said he received a call from central dispatch to transport a couple from the hotel. Says he’s former special ops. I’ll ride along with you,” shouted Reaper.

“This way.” The man with an American accent directed us inside. Reaper, already on board, took Verity from my arms, set her on the bench seat, and put pressure on her wound.

I looked over my shoulder before getting all the way in and saw the man who had also gone down reach for another weapon. A split second later, multiple rounds of shots fired hit him. While there was no question he was dead now, he’d gotten one shot off first.

“Go! Go!” I shouted, jumping from the landing skids so the blade could lift off.

“She’s still alive but is bleeding out!” shouted Macht, who was kneeling next to the woman I’d shot.

“Who the fuck are you?” I shouted at her right before she breathed her last breath.

“Zep, your leg.” Macht pointed to the blood seeping through my jumpsuit. “You need a medic.”

I now knew where that last bullet had hit. "I'll be all right. It's a flesh wound." The truth was, I could barely feel where I was shot even as I stalked over to the man who now lay dead near where Verity's blood had spilled.

I used my uninjured leg to kick him onto his back.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“Who is he?” Macht asked as I stood over the sonuvabitch.

“Xavier fucking Vella.”

I had a million questions, but none as important as learning Verity’s condition. I’d called Reaper three times in as many minutes when he finally picked up.

“How is she?”

“They just took her into the ER.”

As much as I didn’t want to know, I had to ask. “Is she alive?”

“She is, Zep.”

“I’m on my way. Send me your—” I felt the mobile slide from my hand as everything went black and I lost consciousness.

22

ZEPPELIN

When I opened my eyes, I had no idea where I was. It was a hospital; that much, I could tell, but otherwise, the last thing I remembered was standing over Xavier Vella’s dead body.

“You’re awake,” said a British-sounding woman dressed in scrubs.

“Where am I?”

“King’s College Hospital.” She checked my blood pressure and took my temperature.

“What happened?”

“You lost quite a lot of blood. Not as much as you could’ve, mind you. Do you recall being shot?”

I nodded.

“You were lucky the bullet hit a vein versus an artery. You still required surgery, of course.”

“What time is it?”

“Fourteen hundred hours,” she said, motioning to a large clock on the wall I hadn’t noticed. “One of your mates has been here since you were transferred to a room. He just stepped out. I’m sure he’ll be back shortly. Do you have any other questions before I let the surgeon know you’ve come to?”

“Verity, err, Alena Curran.”

She cocked her head.

“She was a patient airlifted here before I was.”

“It doesn’t sound familiar, but if she was brought in by helicopter, it wouldn’t have been here.”

“How did I get here?”

“Ambulance.”

The door opened, and Reaper walked in. “Hey, boss,” he said, looking between the nurse and me.

“If you’ve no more questions, I’ll alert your surgeon now.”

“Verity?” I asked when she left the room and closed the door behind her.

“Out of surgery, but that’s all I’ve been able to find out. Nemesis is on her way here now. Actually, she should have already landed.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“Take me to her.”

Reaper shook his head. “If you mean Verity, she isn’t here. She was transported to Medeor Hospital. It’s the best in Dubai but, also, the closest to Burj Al Arab, and it has a helipad.”

“Bloody hell.” I closed my eyes and shook my head, fighting against my drowsiness. “Get Nem on the phone, would you?”

Reaper pulled out his mobile. “Not responding,” he said after several seconds. “I’ll send a text.”

“What happened at Burj Al Arab?”

Reaper pulled a chair closer to the bed. “How much do you remember?”

“Xavier Vella’s dead. He was the bodyguard?”

“Affirmative.”

“And the woman?”

“Selene Pavia.”

I could hear the woman’s screams in my head. “She yelled the word Sheka. She’s dead, yes? Am I remembering that right?”

Reaper nodded. “Affirmative.”

“How in the bloody hell did they get off the compound on Mallorca, and why weren’t we alerted?”

“Decker Ashford is piecing that together now, but apparently, Francesca Vella suffered a heart attack. Xavier, Selene, and his aunt went to the hospital where she was taken, although the timing is what’s in question. As far as the Vellas leaving Mallorca, they were there under protection, not arrest. It wasn’t as though Rile could stop them from leaving.”

I understood what Reaper was saying. Rile could discourage their departure, but certainly not stop them. “Where are Francesca and her daughter now?”

“Francesca remains in the cardiac ICU at the hospital in Palma. Her daughter, Charlene, was staying next door, at a place the hospital provides for families of ICU patients. Decker is confirming her twenty now.”

“Who will notify them of Xavier’s death?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

I rested my head against the pillow and shut my eyes. “Verity,” I said under my breath.

“What would you like me to do, Zep?”

“Go to the other hospital. Don’t leave until you know Verity’s condition. Do whatever it takes to find out.”

“Understood. Anything else?”

“Where’s my mobile? And my clothes?”

“I believe Macht is in possession of both.”

“Where in the bloody hell is he?”

“Here, sir.”

“Find him!”

When Reaper nodded and left the room, I closed my eyes a second time. The last thing I wanted to do was sleep, but the aftereffects of the anesthesia were making it nearly impossible to stay awake.

“Hello, sir. How are you feeling?” Macht asked.

I stared at the clock, unable to remember what time it was when I’d last looked.

“How long have you been here?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“Approximately fifteen minutes.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

Macht didn’t respond, and I didn’t ask a second time. He hadn’t. Did it matter why not? “Have we heard from Reaper about Verity’s condition?”

“Not yet, sir.”

I saw my mobile sitting on the tray table in front of me, picked it up, and rang Nemesis. The call went straight to voicemail. Next, I tried Reaper.

“I’ve just arrived at the hospital, Zep. No report yet.”

“Hurry the fuck up and get one,” I muttered before ending the call. “Someone has to know her condition, for God’s sake.”

I wanted to scream in frustration. Instead, I called Magnet. “Where are you?” I barked when he picked up.

“Zep, you’re obviously out of surgery and making the lives of those around you miserable.”

“Don’t fuck around with me. Are you at the command center?”

“I am.”

“I need an update on Verity’s condition.”

“Nemesis should be in Dubai very soon if not already. She left as soon as she heard what happened. Took helicopter transport to Gatwick even.”

“Ask Ares if he’s heard anything from her.”

“I don’t need to ask. No one has yet.”

“Whatever you find out, let me know the minute you do.”

“Roger that, Zep. Before you hang up on me, how are you doing?”

“I was shot in the fucking leg. I sure as hell didn’t need to be brought to the hospital, nor did I need surgery.”

Right as I hit the button to end the call, I could hear Magnet chuckling.

“What?” I barked when Macht looked at me with a raised brow.

“You are right to say you didn’t need to be transported here, nor was surgery required. We could’ve let you die instead.”

“Sod off,” I muttered, closing my eyes again and wishing I could get the hell out of here and to the hospital where Verity was. I’d raise the bloody roof and wouldn’t relent until I got some answers.

I swung my legs around and attempted standing, but immediately fell back on the bed. I didn’t bother to look at Macht, who no doubt was smirking. I put my head in my hands. “I just want to know if she’s okay,” I said under my breath.

“I understand, sir. Everyone does. Believe me when I say everything that can be done to get the answers you seek is happening.”

“Not fucking fast enough.”

The door opened, and the nurse I'd seen earlier rushed inside. “What do you think you're doing?” None too gently, she lifted my legs and swung them back on the bed.

“Ouch!” I yelped. “That wasn't necessary.”

“It was, and you should've stopped him.” She pointed at Macht. “You're to stay off this leg until the surgeon says otherwise. Unless, of course, you have a death wish.”

She raised the bed guard and stormed out of the room.

I rested my head against the pillow like I had to every few minutes. When I opened my eyes again, Nemesis was standing by the bed.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

Fuck. What was she doing here? As much as I wanted to know the reason, at the same time, I wanted to plug my ears. I didn't know what I'd do, how I'd react, if she told me Verity was gone.

“What's going on?” I asked in a tone much softer than I'd been using with the guys.

“Hey, Zep. I know you've been asking about Verity's condition.”

“And?”

“She made it out of surgery, and while her prognosis is serious, it's no longer critical.”

“Thank God.”

“There's something else I need to tell you.”

I nodded slowly.

“By the time I reached Medeor Hospital, she was no longer there.”

“Where is she?”

When Nemesis hesitated, I wanted to shout at her to fucking tell me.

“We don't yet know.”

I sat straight up. “Who has her, Nem?” I didn’t care if I wasn’t supposed to stand on my leg. I’d rip the bloody cords and IV from my body, find Verity, and kill whoever had taken her, only after torturing them close to the brink of dying.

“Typhon.”

My eyes opened wide. “Pardon?”

“Typhon arrived before I did and made arrangements to have her transported. Apparently, Verity’s brother was with him. Given he is her immediate family, no one will tell me anything and I’ve been unable to reach Typhon.”

“Why would he do this?”

“Verity is in danger, as are you. As is everyone who was on Burj Al Arab’s helipad when Xavier Vella and Selene Pavia were killed.”

“Selene yelled out Sheka.”

“I’m aware.”

“Do you think Xavier is our S?”

“It’s a theory, Zep, but one with merit. Believe me, every available task force member is working diligently to find out.”

“Reaper said Francesca Vella had a heart attack.”

“We’re waiting for more information from Rile. As soon as I have an update, I’ll let you know.”

“Nem, I need to talk to Typhon.”

She rested her hand on mine. “As do I, Zeppelin.”

“Will you excuse us?” I said to Macht.

“Of course.” He stood and left the room.

Once he was gone, I turned to Nemesis. “Things between Verity and me changed. I know this sounds crazy, even to me, but Nem, I love her.”

“I know.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:39 am

“You do?” I shook my head and laughed, but not because it was funny. “I don’t know how. I just realized it myself.”

“Call it a hunch.”

I put my other hand on top of hers that still rested on mine. “Do you swear she’s okay?”

“Typhon would not have transported her out of Dubai unless it was safe to do so. Her brother wouldn’t have gone along with it either.”

23

ZEPPELIN

It had been two months since I left King’s College Hospital and returned to Shere. Two months and two days since I’d last looked into Verity’s eyes or heard her voice.

Nemesis had suggested more than once I take a few days’ leave, which I adamantly refused to do. I hardly slept with worry that if word came in about Verity, I wouldn’t be present to hear it.

Typhon had gone completely dark. According to Oleander, even she couldn’t reach him. I had a hard time believing her, but calling her out would only result in her refusing to tell me anything she did hear.

Magnet and Schön had gone to the States, met with Baissier, and spoken with the

attorney general in charge of Godwin's indictment. According to what he told them, they'd been in negotiations with Godwin for a plea deal in exchange for a testimony he promised would be earth-shattering, even going so far as saying world-changing. The two had yet to agree to terms when we alerted the American Justice Department that Godwin may have fled, a theory that was proven correct within hours.

Rile reported Charlene Vella-Borg decided against returning to his compound with her mother after she'd learned of Xavier's and Selene's deaths. According to the brief he had prepared, she blamed the coalition for her nephew and his girlfriend dying and no longer trusted our protection.

The brief also stated Bexli had implored Francesca to reconsider, but she refused, saying she wanted to go home.

Delfino, from the Malta task force, along with Atticus from Ares' team, traveled to Gozo, where they were set up to surveil Francesca and her daughter. They would remain on the Maltese island indefinitely as the investigation into Xavier Vella deepened.

Tank and Blackjack, also from the US task force, were scheduled to leave Shere within hours to travel to Tropea along with Brando "Michelangelo" Ripa. According to Nemesis, he was joining Cayman's UK task force as a permanent member. I hadn't spoken to the guy, but I knew Doc Butler and trusted him implicitly.

Everyone else was split into teams, digging into everything we could about Xavier Vella and Selene Pavia.

"Let me get this straight; Xavier Vella's parents died when he was two, is that right?" asked Schön, whose presence I could barely abide, not because she wasn't a good addition to the team, but because just looking at her reminded me of every minute Verity and I had spent together and how much it fucking hurt that I hadn't heard a

word from or about her.

“She’s not so bad,” Magnet said when he caught me scowling in Schön’s direction.

I shrugged. “Just glad she’s your problem, not mine. Have you fucked her yet?”

Magnet and I had been friends for many years, and while I’d seen him angry before, few times were to the extent he appeared now. “Come with me,” he snapped, motioning to the front door of the command center.

“Let it go, Mag.”

“Come. With. Me.” He stalked out of the house, and I followed. Once outside, he grabbed me by the neck and slammed me up against the exterior of the house.

“What the fuck?” I shouted.

He’d pulled his other arm back as if he was about to punch me, but dropped it. He still held me by the throat, though. “Listen to me, you sonuvabitch. You’ve been a miserable fucker since you returned from Dubai, and while we all understand why, I, for one, am reaching the end of what I’m willing to put up with.”

“She was a fucking honey trap agent, Mag. You can’t tell me?—”

His fist came at me and landed straight on my mouth and nose. Mag hit me so hard, for a minute, I thought I might lose consciousness.

“I told you before to listen to me. Apparently, you weren’t paying attention. You are a fucking bastard, and if you don’t settle down, you’ll soon find yourself replaced.”

I wiped the blood streaming from my mouth and nose with the back of my arm. “Let

'em try," I spat.

Magnet let go of me and took a step away. "Since you're still my friend, I'm going to give you one warning, Zep. Do not disparage Schön ever again. She's a good agent, and she's struggling enough with overcoming her reputation. She doesn't need your shit."

I started to laugh. "So you are fucking her."

I'd anticipated the punch that landed in my gut but didn't try to block it. Yeah, it hurt like hell, and seconds later, I lost the contents of my stomach, but it was a welcome distraction from the pain I felt every minute of the day, every single time I thought about Verity.

Page 81

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:40 am

I ached for her, awake and asleep, but the worst part was not understanding. I knew her well enough to get that if she'd wanted to make contact with me, she would have. Especially given Nemesis had assured me of the one thing she was able to—Verity had made a full recovery.

“You know how it is with Unit 23, Zep,” she'd said. “If they don't want you to know where they are, you won't. That comes from the top, and it's fully backed by SIS and the government. My hands are tied, and I'll tell you, I even asked Z, who tried his best, but didn't get any further than I did.”

Those words had slayed me. The woman I'd sworn I detested but then fell in love with in a matter of days was gone. Vanished from my life before I'd had the chance to tell her how I felt.

I slid to the cold ground, wiped my face with the opposite arm, put my head in my hands, and cried.

Rather than going inside once I'd composed myself, I got in my SUV and drove home. I'd avoided going to Wargrave, knowing like everywhere else, it would make me think about Verity.

Now, though, I had to. While he wouldn't believe it, the two punches Magnet had thrown at me, hit where they'd wanted them to—inside my head. I'd spent the last nineteen days pushing everyone away as hard as I could. No one was off-limits, even my best friend. I'd found his soft spot and given him a direct hit, which he'd turned right back around on me.

I got that he'd protect Schön and also that his doing so didn't mean he was sleeping with her. She was on his task force. It was his job to protect her from the likes of angry-and-bitter me. I had no business lashing out at a woman who, from all accounts, had worked damned hard since she left Switzerland. Through her connection to Baissier, she'd been able to get her hands on intel regarding Godwin we may not have otherwise been able to.

Once inside my house, I went upstairs to the bedroom and stripped off all my clothes, having every intention of running water in the tub that was identical to the one at the hotel in Dubai.

After taking one look at it and imagining Verity there, sitting in the water, waiting for me, I turned the shower on instead. I let the stream of hot water run over my face, watching as it turned the color of my dried blood. While my face hurt, it didn't feel like Mag had broken my nose. Not that I'd care that much. It wouldn't have been the first time.

"Argh!" I cried out in the small space. Why in the hell did every thought I had have to remind me of Verity?

"Yours isn't that remarkable," she'd said when I told her I feared she'd make me wear a prosthetic nose. It was the same day she'd put her hand on my upper arm and squeezed, saying my eyes, hair, and build were harder to disguise.

I slid to the floor of the shower like I had to the ground in front of the house in Shere and cried again. This time, harder.

"Henry?" I heard a man's voice call out several minutes later. His use of my given name exacerbated the persistent pain of missing Verity I felt.

"In here, James. Just finishing a shower," I shouted back to my brother.

I turned the water off, toweled myself dry, then went downstairs after putting on a set of flannels.

“Oh—that looks like it hurts,” James said when he stood and we embraced. “How are you, Henry?” he asked, taking a step back.

“Been better.”

My siblings knew better than to ask anything about the work I did, as did my mum, so James waited to see if I’d elaborate.

“I got this way because I was being a wanker,” I told him, pointing at my face.

He raised a brow and smirked. “How unusual.”

“Yeah, well, this time, I was worse than usual.”

“Anything you want to talk about?”

While I was closest to Robert, my brother who lived in California, the four kids in our family had always gotten on well. It was due to our parents who’d taught us through love more than an iron fist.

“It’s a woman,” I confessed.

While James nodded, he showed no other reaction.

“She’s someone I work with and bloody brilliant,” I continued. “Beautiful, strong—” My voice cracked, and I couldn’t continue.

James led me over to a dining chair, and we both took a seat.

“What happened with the two of you?”

“Initially, things I can’t talk about. But then, she vanished.”

He raised a brow.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:40 am

“I know she’s okay. Her disappearing is due to the kind of work she does.”

“But you miss her.”

I hung my head. “So fucking much it sometimes hurts to breathe.”

My brother slid his chair closer and hugged me. “I’m sorry, Henry.”

I wiped the tears that had fallen and sat back in my chair. “I wanted to bring her here. She would’ve loved this house.”

James smiled. “Who wouldn’t? I keep threatening to move Jane and the kids in here when you’ve been gone a while, but neither Mum nor Nance would stand for it.”

We both chuckled. Nance was our sister, and if there was anyone I expected to find here after a long absence, it would be her.

“I miss them. And you,” I said, turning my head to look out the window. “And this place. I actually saw the two of us living here together. God, James, I even imagined having children with her.”

I crossed my arms on the table and lowered my head. James rested his hand on my back. “I think you could stand a drink, Henry.”

“A bottle should do it.”

He stood, went to the pantry, pulled out a bottle of Scotch, and returned to the table,

then opened it and handed it to me. I took a swig, handed it back, and he did the same.

“Reminds me of when we were young blokes,” he said, setting it on the table in front of me. “Good God, we made a lot of trouble for Mum and Dad.”

James and I were closest in age, and he was right. We’d spent a good amount of our teenage years raising hell. “They loved us anyway,” I said.

“That’s the key, I think.”

“What is?” I asked.

“You keep loving someone. Even when their actions hurt you, even when you don’t understand. You just keep loving them. Eventually, they’ll come around.”

I took another swig of Scotch. “I hope so, James. I’ve never hoped for anything more in my life.”

24

ZEPPELIN

“Take all the time you need,” said Nemesis when I called to tell her where I was. “We’ll manage in your absence but will be very happy when you’re back.”

I thanked her and ended the call before returning to my brother, who still sat at the table.

“I suppose I should go see Mum before I get pissed.”

“Or more pissed.” He stood. “I’ll go with you.”

My brother and I walked the four blocks from my place to the house we’d grown up in. “It doesn’t look any different,” I said, standing outside the front gate.

“Some things never change, outside of a fresh coat of paint and a new roof,” said James. “Oh, and Mum’s redecorating our old bedrooms. Yours was first.”

My mouth hung open. “Why mine?”

“You’re here the least.”

“What about Robert? He lives in the States, for God’s sake.”

“He, Mary, and the kids were here for Christmas. That’s what motivated our mother to start the project.”

Bloody hell. I’d missed Christmas with my family. It would’ve been the first time we were all together in years. “I wish I’d known. I would’ve loved to see them.” I tried to remember where I even was then, but the Scotch, coupled with the punches Magnet had landed, made things a little fuzzy.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:40 am

“You coming in?” James asked, standing near the front door.

“Henry?” my mum shrieked when I walked through the gate and up the steps. “Look at you,” she said, cupping my cheek when I got close enough. “A beautiful boy in spite of a few bruises.” She pulled me into a hug. “It’s so good to see you.”

“You too, Mum,” I said as she took my hand and led me inside.

“Hey, what about me?” said James, standing on the threshold.

“Good to see you too, dearest.” She waved behind her before leaning close to me. “I saw him just last night. Are you hungry? I’ve got some stew I could heat up for you.”

“That sounds great, Mum.” Before she could walk away, I pulled her into another hug. “I’ve missed you so much.”

She pulled back and looked into my now black-and-blue eyes. “What’s this?” She looked beyond me to James. “Did your brother really just say he’s missed me, or is my hearing goin’?”

James walked past both of us. “He’s got girl trouble.”

“Girl trouble? Who is this woman? I’ll give her a piece of my mind.”

I shook my head and laughed. “Big mouth,” I shouted over her shoulder at my brother.

“She would’ve gotten it out of you eventually; I just saved us all time.”

“Henry?” I heard my sister holler as she raced through the front door. “Marilee called and said she swore it was you with James, and I didn’t believe her.”

When she ran forward, I caught her in my arms and spun in a circle.

“You look a fright,” she said when I set her on her feet.

“Girl trouble,” my mother told her.

Nance’s eyes met mine. “A girl did this to you? Would I ever like to meet her!”

Coming home, seeing my family, was the best thing I could’ve done. It didn’t make the pain of missing Verity go away, but I found myself smiling as I told them about “Alena.” Soon, when I shared how much she busted my balls, we were all laughing.

My mother reached over and rested her hand on mine. “I don’t know what happened between the two of you, and I know well enough you won’t say, but I’ll tell you this. It’s all going to work out, Henry. I feel it in my bones.”

I put my hand on hers. “I hope so, Mum. I love her.”

“I always knew it would take a very special woman to win your heart. That she’s so deserving of it, tells me she won’t be able to stay away long.”

“Unless she doesn’t love me back.”

She scoffed. “Nothing you’ve said made me think she’s an idiot.”

Rather than having Mum heat up stew, we decided to go to the pub for dinner.

Nance's husband brought their three kids, including a new baby, and Jane brought her and James's two little ones.

"You should see Bobby and Miriam," said my mum. "They're growing like the weeds in my garden." She pulled out her mobile and showed me photos of my oldest brother and his family. "Such good kids," she murmured before turning to the other four seated around her. "As are all of you, my precious darlings." She waved in Nance's direction, who was holding her youngest. "And the baby."

"The woman was made to be a grandmother," said my sister, sidling up to me. "Did James tell you? She's redecorating our old bedrooms. I think she means to have all her 'grands,' as she calls them, move in with her."

"It's good to see you, Nance." When I leaned forward to kiss her cheek, she put her head on my shoulder.

"I hope things work out between you and Alena."

My mum caught my eye, nodded, and smiled. "You just keep loving her, Henry. Eventually, she'll come around," she said, repeating my brother's earlier words.

I prayed they were right.

I spent three days at home, getting to know all my nieces and nephews, including one who was born since I was last home. Little by little, the shy ones warmed up to me after getting used to my black eyes.

Page 84

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:40 am

Every so often, one would crawl up on my lap and accidentally kick my leg where I'd been shot. I tried my hardest not to grimace and frighten them all over again.

“When do you have to go back?” Nance asked when she and her husband announced it was time to go home and were met with groans from their kids.

“Tomorrow.”

She nodded. “Don't stay away so long next time, all right?”

“I won't. I promise.”

She raised a brow. “You don't usually make promises you can't keep.”

“So, you know I mean it.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “I miss you so much, Henry.”

I kissed her hair and pulled her into an embrace. “I miss you too. All of you.” And Verity. I missed her the most.

“You're back,” said Magnet, greeting me when I walked in the next morning. He embraced me but cringed first. “Who did that to you?”

I laughed. “Some asshole.”

“Let me know if you want me to have a go at him for you.”

“Yeah? What makes you think you can take him when he couldn’t take me?”

Mag put his hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry, Zep.”

“Don’t be. I deserved it, and what’s more, I needed it.”

“How’s the family?”

“All happy and healthy. Nance has three kids now, and while they didn’t say, something tells me James and Jane might have another on the way.”

“I’d like to see them sometime soon.”

“They’d like to see you too, Mag.”

“Listen, there’s something Schön wants to talk to you about.”

“You didn’t?—”

“If you’re about to ask if I told her what you’d said, I would never. It wouldn’t be about protecting you. It would be to protect her.”

I nodded. “I get it, Mag, and I’m sorry I said those things.”

“She’s a lot different than you think, Zep. You should give her a chance.”

It made me think about Verity and how much time I’d wasted with her. I’d spent months arguing with her when I could’ve spent that time getting to know her better.

“What does she want to talk to me about?”

“I let her tell you.”

“Right. Let me just alert Nem I’m back?—”

Magnet shook his head. “You should talk to Schön first.”

“All right,” I said, cocking my head.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:40 am

I followed him through the house and into the solarium, where she was sitting, reading something on her laptop. “Hey, Zeppelin,” she said, looking up at me.

“Hey, Schön.”

“I told him you had something you wanted to share with him,” said Magnet.

Her eyes widened. “Right. Um, now?”

“The sooner, the better.”

I sat in a chair across from her. “What is it?”

“I think I know where Verity is.”

25

ZEPPELIN

“Hello, Mr. Evans. Welcome back,” said Bernard when I pulled up to the valet station at Châteaux Relais. While his words were friendly, his eyes were hooded.

“Thank you. I, um...”

“I’d offer you a ride in the sleigh, but the golf cart will get you to the chalet faster.”

Up until that moment, I’d doubted Schön’s theory that Verity was in St. Moritz.

“Yes. Faster is better.”

“Give me five minutes.”

“Sure. Um, Bernard?”

“Yes, sir?”

“I’d like to surprise Mrs. Evans.”

He nodded. “Of course.”

When he returned in the golf cart, I saw a bouquet of roses and a bottle of wine in the front seat. “You’re going to need those,” he said, also handing me a key card.

When we got to within sight distance of the chalet, I asked Bernard to stop. While I’d removed the cameras I installed around it before we left St. Moritz, Verity may have put more back in their place. I wanted my arrival to be as much of a surprise as it possibly could be.

“Good luck,” he said once I got out and he’d turned the cart around to head back to the lodge.

I nodded once. “Thanks for these,” I said, holding up the wine and roses.

After he pulled away, I made my way through the woods as stealthily as I could. While I didn’t see any cameras, they were small enough they’d be hard for me to spot unless I put them there myself.

Bernard had given me a key, but I wondered how smart it was for me to use it. Verity was a trained assassin. By surprising her, I might end up dead.

I knocked, leaning my ear up to the door to listen for her. I heard her footfalls get close, then nothing. Finally, she pulled the door open.

“Hello, Alena,” I said. “I come bearing gifts and asking for forgiveness.”

She raised a brow, looked behind me, then waved me inside. “Forgiveness?”

“It was Bernard’s insistence. Apparently, he thinks I’ll need all the help I can get.”

“How did you find me?” she asked, arms folded.

“You won’t believe it.”

“Try me.”

“Schön thought you might be here.”

“I see.” When she walked over to the window, I saw she had a slight limp and used a cane.

I set the bouquet and bottle of wine on the table and joined her.

“I’m sorry,” she said when she was close enough for me to kiss her. If only I thought that was what she wanted.

“Can I get you a glass of wine?”

She shook her head. “I can’t. Not with the, um, medication I’m on.”

“Glass of water? An espresso? I’ve gotten pretty good at making them.”

She smiled. “No, thanks.”

“Can we sit?” I asked when I noticed her rest both hands on the cane.

“Sure.”

I motioned for her to go ahead of me, disappointed when she chose a chair over the

sofa. I had to be close to her, so I sat on the ottoman in front of her. “What happened? I mean, I know what happened that day on the helipad. What came next?”

“Surgery. Three actually. Where the bullet hit, there was damage to my spine.”

I moved closer and spread my legs so hers were between mine, then put my hands on the outside of her thighs.

“I had to, um, I mean, it took some time for me to be able to walk.”

It was so hard to not ask why Typhon hadn't told anyone. Why she hadn't contacted me, but I stopped myself. Alena was at least talking. I'd let her tell me in her own time.

My thumbs caressed her legs beneath her trousers, and I kept my eyes riveted to hers.

“I, um...”

“What?” I whispered after she didn't continue for several seconds.

She squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. “My brother was there. He helped.”

“I'm glad he could be with you.”

“I'm sorry, Zeppelin. I just couldn't...”

“Zeppelin couldn't make it. Henry is here.”

Her eyes filled with tears, and when she broke down, I lifted her into my arms as gently as I could, carried her over to the bed, and held her while she cried.

We stayed that way, neither of us speaking, until the sun was going down. “I’ll light the fire,” I said when she shivered.

I set the logs as quickly as possible, struck the match, then lay beside her like I was before, and pulled a blanket over us before wrapping my arms around her.

“There were times I thought it was all a dream.”

I closed my eyes and breathed in the scent of her. “It wasn’t.”

“What happened between us. It was so fast.”

Page 87

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:40 am

I cupped her cheek. “Look at me, Alena.”

She raised her face.

“I thought a lot about the time I wasted. Wishing I could go back and do it all over again. Get to know you, spend time with you. All those weeks I could’ve seen you for who you really are instead of arguing with you.”

“I’ve wished that too.”

“Those few days we had together, they were the best of my life.”

Her eyes darted back and forth between mine.

“I mean it, Alena.”

“Do you?”

I leaned forward and kissed her. Warmth spread throughout my body, warmth I hadn’t felt in over two months, when she didn’t pull away.

“It was the first time in my life I fell in love.”

“Henry?”

“I love you, Alena. I’ll wait forever to hear you say it back to me, but I can’t wait another minute to say those words to you. I love you.” Not trusting what she might

say to me, I kissed her again, gently at first, but when she deepened it, I matched her, passion to passion.

She abruptly ended it and put her hand on my face. “Can you forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive.”

“I didn’t think...I mean, the surgeries and the recovery and?—”

I put my finger on her lips. “I want to know everything you went through, what you’re going through now, and what lies ahead. I only ask that you don’t say you’re sorry again. I understand. Everything you did was because you believed it was the right thing for you. I’ll never question those decisions. I also won’t force you to allow me to stay now. But, Alena, I will ask you to let me.”

“What about the mission? You know I can never...I can’t go back.”

“There is an entire coalition handling the mission. I go where I’m needed most, and the way I see it, that’s here, with you.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“The only way I’ll leave is if you tell me you don’t want me here. If you tell me you don’t think you can ever love me.”

“I can’t tell you either of those things.”

I tightened my hold around her. “Why not?”

“Because I do want you here, and, Henry, I already love you.”

VERITY

Henry and I spent two weeks together, only leaving the chalet when we absolutely had to. We spent hours making love, talking, eating, and going for short walks so I could strengthen my legs.

We ordered food and groceries to be delivered, and other than when I had to go to physical therapy, it was the only time we saw any other people. Even then, it was only one person—Bernard.

When I returned to Châteaux Relais, I'd told him I was in a car accident and that my husband was working and unable to travel here with me. I'd asked him not to talk to anyone else about my situation, and he'd promised he wouldn't. Since Hans was gone, there wasn't anyone else here to meet him anyway.

I could see the anger he'd directed at Henry at first, but little by little, when he saw how happy I was, his attitude softened.

While Nemesis knew where he was and that he was with me, I'd asked him not to tell her what I went through. I wanted to do that myself and in my own time.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:40 am

“I’m resigning from Unit 23,” I said as we stood in the kitchen, making espresso, shortly after the sun came up.

“Will Typhon accept your resignation?”

“I’ll give him no choice.”

We walked over to the bed together, my arm in his. I needed the cane less and less, but Henry insisted he be close enough that if I had to lean on him, I could.

As we looked out at the falling snow, I took a deep breath, willing myself to go ahead and say the words I’d wanted to for the last couple of days. “I’d like to go to Shere.”

We were sitting up, Henry’s back resting against the bed’s headboard with my back to his front. He took my empty cup from my hand and set it on the table beside him along with his. Then he wrapped his arms around me. “Tell me more.”

I bit my bottom lip. “I may not be able to be in the field, but I still think I can contribute to the coalition.”

“You can do whatever you set your mind to, Alena.”

“For now, it’s seeing if I can get my old job back.” I glanced over my shoulder at his confused expression.

“Your old job?”

“With the Swiss task force.”

He hugged me tighter. “We don’t have to return to Shere for that. It’s a job you never lost.”

“No? You’re sure my boss won’t mind?”

“As long as he—I—get to see you every day, I won’t care where we are.”

“There will still be ops, Zep.”

“Zep, eh? Is he back?”

“I have to get used to calling you that again. At least in front of the others.”

“You can call me Henry. Unless...”

“Unless, what?”

He turned me in his arms so we were facing each other. “If you’re about to insist we keep what’s between us a secret, I’m afraid that ship has sailed, as they say.”

“Even if everyone didn’t know already, I wouldn’t want it to be a secret.”

He smiled. “Why not?”

“Because every time Bexli kissed Cayman or Nem kissed Ares or Wren kissed Wilder—I could go on and on. It seems as though there are more couples than not at the command center now. Anyway, every time I saw someone kiss, I’d want to kiss you.”

“I like the sound of that very much.”

“Do you have to clear it with Nemesis?” I asked.

“Us kissing? I don’t think she’ll mind.”

I swatted at him. “You know I mean me returning.”

“My task force, my decision, but even if I did have to clear it with her, I know she’d be the first to welcome you home.”

“Home?”

“Work-home. I’m hoping you’ll want to make Wargrave our home-home. But if you don’t, if you’re not happy there, we’ll figure something else out.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:40 am

Henry had told me so much about it that I felt as though I'd already visited. While I would've predicted hearing his mother, brother, sister, and their families all lived within walking distance of one another would've freaked me out, it didn't. I actually liked the idea. Based on what he told me about them, I knew I'd like them straightaway.

“Can we go there first?” I asked.

“To Wargrave?”

I nodded.

“Of course. You're not nervous about meeting my family, are you? They're going to love you as much as I do. Nance, in particular, since I told her you enjoyed busting my balls. My mum too. I mean, everyone will. The nieces and nephews can be a tad overwhelming, but we don't have to spend that much time with them if you'd rather not.”

“I think I would like it, actually.”

“Yeah?”

“I like children.”

He closed his eyes and rested his head against the pillow.

“What?”

“I know we haven’t talked about, you know, the future.”

“Okay...”

“I told James I saw you and I having children together.” He said the words so quickly that I laughed.

“Henry?”

He raised his head. “Yeah?”

“I saw us having children together too. I still do.”

He sat up. “You do?”

I nodded. “I’m a bit old-fashioned, though. I’m thinking we should get married first.”

He picked the ring Nem had given me for the op up from the side table. Since he arrived at the resort two weeks ago, I’d never seen him take his off.

“Until we can pick out one of your own, will you wear this ring after I propose?”

“When are you proposing?”

He shifted me to the pillow and got down on one knee beside the bed. “Alena, will you marry me?”

I held out my hand so he could slip the ring on my finger. “Yes, Henry, I will marry you.”

“I have an idea.”

I smiled. "Go on."

"We fly to the UK tomorrow and file our notice to marry before we go to Wargrave."

"Okay."

"You haven't heard the rest of my idea."

I laughed. "What else?"

"There'd be just enough time for us to marry on the twenty-ninth day of February."

Page 90

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:40 am

“Leap year? Is that so we only have to celebrate our anniversary once every four years?”

He looked at me with his puppy-dog eyes and pouted. “No. I just thought it would be cool.”

I shook my head and smiled. “Yes, my love. It would be very cool. As if I could ever resist you, especially when you look at me like a sweet little boy.”

“You’re going to be forced to build up your resistance.”

“Why?”

“Once we have kids, you’ll never be able to say no to anything they want.”

I shrugged. “I’ll be the good-cop mom. You can be the mean-cop dad.”

He stood, then lay beside me. “It worked for my parents. I guess it can work for us.”

He frowned.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I was just reminded of a conversation I had with my brother. He said the key to life is to keep loving someone even when their actions hurt you, even when you don’t understand. You just keep loving them. Eventually, they’ll come around.”

He kissed me. “Thank God you came around, Alena.”

I shook my head. “You came around, Henry. You found me and showed me you loved me, even though you didn’t understand my actions, even though I’d hurt you. I’m the one who’s thankful.”

The next morning, we left for the UK, stopped and filed our notice to marry, then Henry took me to Wargrave. From the moment I saw his house, the moment I stepped inside, I knew it would be our home.

An hour after we arrived, Henry’s mother, brother, sister, their spouses, nieces, and nephews all arrived to welcome us.

As I met Henry’s family, I immediately knew they’d be my family too.

“Can I call you Aunt Alena?” Henry’s oldest niece, Hilary, asked.

I bent at the waist so I could look her in the eye. “Of course you can because that’s what I am.”

27

ZEPPELIN

Nervousness was never something that plagued me, but I felt it this morning. I had no reason to. Verity was as much a part of the coalition as I was. Yet I worried about the way we’d respond to each other. Or the way I’d react to her. I wasn’t used to her being hands-off. I touched and kissed whenever, wherever, and however I wanted to. Here at the command center, I worried about making her uncomfortable.

“You have a tell too, you know?” she said, reaching over to touch my hand as we sat in the parked SUV. “Your eyes scrunch almost imperceptibly, but I can see it. What are you worried about? Are you thinking it’s a bad idea for me to return to the

group?”

I took her hand in mine. “God, no. It’s the best thing that could’ve happened. I’m thrilled you’re back.”

“Tell me what worries you.”

“Truthfully? Keeping my hands to myself. Resisting the urge to kiss you. Pulling you onto my lap if you walk by the chair where I’m sitting.”

“Oh. All that,” she said, smirking. “Just so you know, I have no intention of keeping my hands to myself or resisting the other things you mentioned.”

“Be serious.”

The smirk left her face. “I am, Zep. We’re professionals, and the minute we walk in the door, that is the mode we’ll fall into. Don’t overthink this.”

I nodded. “Ready?”

“We’ve been sitting in the parked car for over five minutes. Yes, I’m ready.” She winked.

Perhaps it was a coincidence, or maybe someone had noticed us pull in, but when we came in the front door, we saw several people gathered in the main sitting room where we held full-team briefings.

“Welcome back,” said Nemesis, the first to approach us and hug Verity.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:40 am

At the same time, Magnet walked up to me, started to shake my outstretched hand, then pulled me into an embrace. We patted each other's backs like guys do. "You look well," he said, leaning closer. "Must be all the sex."

I chuckled and shook my head. "In part."

My eyes met Verity's, and she nodded. We'd agreed to announce our engagement straightaway so everyone present knew we were in a relationship that we had no intention of hiding. I cleared my throat and held my hand out to her. She took it and stood beside me.

"We have a couple of announcements. First, Verity is remaining a member of the Swiss task force." I turned to Magnet and shook my finger. "No attempting to steal her back." I squeezed her hand.

"Also, I've resigned from Unit 23, not that I was ever official, anyway," she said.

"I beg to differ," Typhon, who I hadn't seen enter the room, shouted out. "However, I have sadly accepted. You belong here, Verity."

She nodded in his direction. "Thank you, sir."

"And finally, we wanted to invite you all to our wedding on February 29."

"You're engaged!" gasped Nemesis. "Many congratulations," she said to me before turning to Verity. "And best wishes to you." She turned to those in the room. "We were about to hold a briefing to get everyone up to speed on the AMPS

investigation.” She glanced over her shoulder at us. “It seems now would be the perfect time to do so.”

Magnet, who was nearest to us, motioned for Verity to take a seat. Schön, who had been in the chair beside him, stood and walked to another part of the room. Grateful, Verity and I waved our thanks and took the seats. No doubt they’d both noticed her cane, which she brought more just in case, given she rarely used it anymore.

Nemesis nodded at Ares, who lowered the room’s screen.

“I’m going to focus on recent events first. If anyone has questions about things that occurred prior, please hold your inquiries until the end, and I’ll address them. Before we get into the AMPS investigation, Oleander?”

“Yes?”

“Do we have an update on the ‘Ndrangheta op?”

“Poseidon and Michelangelo are still in Tropea, investigating. Tank, Blackjack, and Atticus, from the US task force, recently joined them. So far, we’ve not been able to find proof tying ‘Ndrangheta to a named trafficking ring. However, intel has confirmed they do engage in it. The connection with Godwin suggests the strong possibility they have some affiliation with AMPS. I’ll request an updated brief if you’d like.”

“Please do so,” Nemesis responded.

I wondered why O wasn’t in Tropea with Poseidon since, originally, she had been. It wasn’t a question I’d ask now, though.

“Moving along,” said Nem, clearing her throat. “On thirteen November, Zeppelin and

other members of the Swiss task force, with help from MI6's UAE team, intercepted Xavier Vella and Selene Pavia as they were fleeing Dubai."

Both of their photos appeared on the screen.

"Our working theory is Xavier Vella was responsible for former Ambassador James Godwin's murder. Based on a name Selene called out as Xavier was fired on, Sheka, we believe he is the S in AMPS.

"The two, Xavier and Selene, fled Mallorca at a time coinciding with a health crisis experienced by Francesca Vella." Her image also appeared on the screen, as did Charlene Vella-Borg's. "Upon her release from hospital, Francesca and her daughter chose to return to the island of Gozo rather than remain at the DéLeon compound, where they'd been residing under our protection since November of last year. Any questions thus far?" She looked around the room, but no one responded.

Two more images appeared on the screen, that of Lorenzo "Mithras" Moretti and Valerie "Pharaoh" Olin.

"As standard procedure, DNA samples were taken from all four victims suspected of playing a role in AMPS. While Oleander reported Pharaoh accused her of killing her brother, as of this morning, we've learned Mithras was actually her half brother."

Verity's eyes met mine as we both processed that information.

"What about Xavier?" I asked.

"We're awaiting a more detailed report to be certain, but rapid testing indicates he and Pharaoh are full siblings."

I was stunned, as were most in the room, based on their murmurs.

“And Selene?” Oleander asked.

“She is not related.”

“Wouldn’t put it past the arseholes to inbreed,” she muttered.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:40 am

Nemesis raised a brow in her direction, but I'd witnessed the half smile she tried to mask.

“Previously, it was believed Marco and Yasmine Vella were Xavier's birth parents. The two were killed in an automobile accident when Xavier was two years old. However, in the same way Pharaoh referred to Mithras as her brother, she confessed that Salvatore Rávdos, aka Cronos, was her father.” Nem paused.

“Have you obtained birth records?” I asked.

“We have not. While Decker Ashford has worked tirelessly to obtain them, other than Salvatore's and Francesca's, no others exist.”

Which could mean two things. A man like Salvatore would've had the means to pay someone off to “lose” birth records or, in cases like Seshat's twin, have the certificate altered. It could also mean the births were private and the children's names, birth dates, and other vital statistics were never filed.

“Are you saying there are no birth records for Marco Vella or Charlene Vella-Borg either?” Verity asked.

“None that we've been able to locate.”

“What about Marco's wife, Yasmine?”

“Apologies,” said Nem, looking through her notes. “We do have a certificate for her as well as Selene Pavia.”

“Forgive the interruption, Nemesis, but I need to get this straight in my head. Valerie ‘Pharaoh’ Olin and Xavier ‘Sheka’ Vella are siblings. Lorenzo ‘Mithras’ Moretti is their half brother. In Mithras’ case, it could mean the three share a mother. However, it would make more sense that Salvatore Rávdos is the link.”

“I agree.”

“Which leaves us with the question of who the biological mothers are,” I added.

“Don’t forget we believe Seshat and her twin may be Salvatore Rávdos’ offspring as well,” said Verity. “Do we have DNA results for the woman we believe is Seshat’s twin?”

“We do not. Verity, can you please follow up with the lab and ask them to do a comparison with Xavier and Pharaoh?”

“Roger that,” Verity responded.

“Among our primary objectives is identifying the final leader of AMPS. Given we’ve been operating under the theory the code names, if you will, relate to the letters of the acronym, we’re looking for A.”

“Yes, Schön?” I looked over my shoulder and saw the woman had her hand raised.

“I may have missed something, but Xavier was raised as a Vella. Francesca referred to him as her grandson, and he referred to Charlene Vella-Borg as his aunt. Wouldn’t it stand to reason his and Pharaoh’s mother would be related to Francesca?”

“Yes, it would,” Nemesis responded.