**Chapter 34**

**June 10, 1931, Camp Eagle 7, Ancyra, Turkmen Empire**

Over the past several weeks, Visha had been proved to be painfully correct in her assessment of the Turkmen Army’s mages. They were twice as arrogant as any mage who ever flew under Empire colors, with less than half the skill of the average Imperial graduate. Even though the Turkmen army as a whole had been desperately trying to modernize ever since their embarrassing defeat at the hands of the Rumelian independence movements, their mage corps was the last holdout of the traditional aristocracy that had previously dominated their officer corps.

The reason for this was quite interesting. It seemed that unlike Europe which had largely ignored or even outright persecuted magic in the middle ages (except the odd mage who got themselves canonized), the Middle East had celebrated it, and any mage strong enough to perform magic with whatever primitive tools existed at the time rapidly found wealth and advancement being showered on them and their families.

As a result, the better parts of Turkmen society had a genetic predisposition towards magecraft, and the Turkmen were able to put together a somewhat adequate aerial mage corps using just recruits from the ‘right’ people. This policy had been cast aside only recently in favor of mass recruitment of all qualified males, and so the senior officers of the Turkish aerial mages were almost uniformly of the moneyed classes. And it was these seniors that were first in line for our little training regime.

If I’d had a choice, I’d have thrown the lot back and asked for their newer recruits instead. But I wasn’t consulted on the matter. No, I’d been hired for a job, and I had to deal. Our first batch consisted of veteran mages who had been sent for additional training. Well, they called it additional training. I would have called it remedial training as that was what it boiled down to.

Unfortunately, no professional likes to be told that they suck at their job, and that they need to learn how to do it right from some girl much younger than them. Even in the Empire, it would have been a bitter pill to swallow. Then there was the fact that some of these soldiers could claim mages in their family tree dating back centuries. From what I could tell, none of those old-fashioned mages came close to matching the power and versatility of the modern aerial mage, but they still seemed to think this hoary old ancestry counted against my years of very current combat experience. Throw in a culture that encouraged them to look down on women, and it was no surprise that the first few days of the camp had been rife with incidents of insubordination.

It was a good thing I was an old hand at getting people to take me seriously in spite of my appearance. I had to beat down several of the officers, but they soon learned to take me at my word when I threatened dire consequences. The artillery was a big help in convincing them that no matter how much they hated training under me, it could always get worse.

However, I had been worried for Visha. Although she’d trained mages before, she’d never had to deal with such truculent subordinates. I’d already mentally prepared myself to step in if things got out of hand. In my past life I’d occasionally had to deal with cases of sexual harassment in the workplace, and I was fully prepared to face something similar here.

I stopped worrying after the first time one of the Army mages made a crude comment. It had been aimed at one of our female recruits, but it had also been made within Visha’s hearing. Fifteen minutes later, Visha finally got done lecturing him on proper conduct. A lecture delivered in its entirety with a mage blade pricking the man’s balls.

Naturally, my accursed hormones found that attractive instead of horrifying. It’s a good thing that, with almost a hundred students, we were far too busy for me to do anything stupid.

Slowly, painfully, we managed to restore some discipline to both the regular military trainees as well as our own raw recruits. I will say one thing though, having a bunch of jerks sneering at them did wonders to motivate our own recruits to put their noses to the grindstone. It honestly reminded me of some Hollywood high school or college drama from my last life.

Of course, no matter how hard they worked, there was no way our trainees could catch up to the regular troops. The regulars might be arrogant and their training outdated, but they were professional aerial mages. The basics of flight, shielding, shooting, and enchanting, they were adequately versed in all of these. It was mostly a question of breaking them of any bad habits and outdated doctrines (static rifle lines, really?) and instilling in them the mindset and skills of the modern mage.

In the meantime, the ladies (and three gents) of the Silver Lances were struggling through basic exercises, drills, and tutoring in spell structures and formulas. Those first months they weren’t even permitted to touch an orb except under strict supervision, and they certainly weren’t permitted to leave the ground. There was a bit of grumbling at this at first. Then I started the regulars on artillery drills, and suddenly my recruits saw the virtues of preparatory classwork.

During those first few months I was focused so entirely on getting my training camp off the ground that I barely paid any attention to what went on in the wider world. Luckily, my various investments seemed to be chugging along without much input from me.

I did make sure I successfully took over majority ownership of Black Diamond from Cold Steel, which meant the pitchblende stockpile was now once more under my control. No sign yet of any country having discovered atomics, so I was in it for the long haul.

Black Diamond’s CEO had also taken the rather proactive step of setting up copper wire and piping production facilities in Abyssinia to more directly supply Emperor Tafari’s infrastructure needs. It meant pouring more money into a company that was barely breaking even, but the good PR from this effort meant the Emperor agreed to give Black Diamond rights to survey for mineral resources. I had no idea what sort of resources Ethiopia might have, but with any luck they’d find something profitable.

My decision to hand over my cash reserves to my Wald bank for investment also turned out well. The returns weren’t spectacular, but I had asked for my portfolio to be weighted towards the conservative. More importantly, it was all happening without my having to do any of the work. And since the bank seemed trustworthy, I decided to give them even more of my business. I had a wide portfolio of oddball stocks that I’d picked up in my time in Djibouti and Abyssinia. I dumped them all on my account manager, to sell or hold as the bank saw fit.

And speaking of Djibouti, Sunrise Botanicals had set up their office and were already exploring the possibilities of *khat* exports to Europe and the Middle East. They were also continuing experiments with chemical boosters to magical enhancements, and seeing some results. I made a mental note to have them send over a sample of the final product if they ever managed to get one that was safe for extended consumption.

The rest of my companies were making ends meet in spite of the ongoing depression. Dark Earth was showing some success in bringing modern agriculture, consumer products, and manufacturing to East Africa and the Seychelles, but they were still a long way from getting back their initial investment. Velvet Iron was having to lean more and more heavily on arms sales to make up for the much reduced demand for their security services. As for Household Magicks, they just had a surprisingly successful public offering, and were expanding rapidly with the new funds.

All in all, I had been relegated to the position of silent partner in almost all my holdings. That was fine by me. I was painfully aware that too many of my companies had dealings on the shady side of the law. The less I knew about it, the better. I’d only step in if something truly egregious showed up in the high-level reports.

For example, Becker was still working for Cold Steel, and he’d sent me a note that the company had ordered him to create what sounded like a private army to expand their operations into Angola. When I read that, I was extremely thankful I’d gotten out while I could. I didn’t bother giving him any instructions. He was an adult and a competent officer. I just told him to be very careful not to be caught breaking any laws.

I considered sending a warning to Lena and Vargas, since Velvet Iron and Sunrise still held lots of Cold Steel stock, but then I decided against it. It would be nice if they could use their position as shareholders to steer Cold Steel in a more moral direction, but given what I knew they’d already gotten up to, such expectations were foolish. The best I could hope for is when Lergen inevitably came down on Cold Steel, they’d be smart enough to stay out of the splash zone. Well, worst came to worst, sheer distance should insulate them from the fallout.

If I really had been the hero that Visha imagined me as, I would have jumped in with both feet to dismantle the various criminal entanglements and restore my companies to respectability. Certainly, as the biggest shareholder, some might argue it was my moral responsibility to do so.

To these hypothetical critics I say, survival trumps morality. Right now the only company I cared about was Silver Lance, because it would give me the power I needed to survive my enemies. But training my own mage force from scratch was a hideously expensive proposition, even with all the government subsidies. I needed money, and lots of it, and however bankrupt their morals, my corporate ventures were showing healthy dividends. Thus, in spite of my qualms, I left the proxy for my shareholder votes in the hands of my chosen CEOs. Let them continue to rule my companies as their own fiefs, and let them make whatever decision they felt was best for their bottom lines. I had my own bottom line, and as long as they kept mindful of it, they could do as they liked.

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**October 27, 1931, Londinium, Allied Kingdom**

Kelust Gulbenk liked to think of himself as a good man. Unlike most wealthy people who harbored such a conceit, there existed witnesses who might willingly support such a claim.

Over the years he had donated millions of pounds to churches, orphanages, hospitals, and other such worthy causes, and not just in his homeland, but across three continents. True, finance experts estimated him to be worth somewhere in the neighbourhood of fifty million pounds (their estimates were badly short), but Kelust liked to think that charity with no strings attached was always a virtue, no matter how much one could afford it.

In fact, he’d always disliked the religious parable of how a few coppers donated by a pauper held more virtue than large sums from the rich. No matter how virtuous a poor donor might be, it was a simple fact that in this sinful world, you needed the big bucks to get things done. And if his charitable donations brought him to the attention of various important people who would then proceed to open yet more doors for him? Goodwill begat goodwill, no matter what jealous cynics might say.

But no matter how much he might wish peace and prosperity on all, even a good man can be pushed too far.

For Kelust, ‘too far’ had come fifteen years previously, when the Turkmen Empire had slaughtered millions of his fellow Armenians.

It had been more than a murder of his people. It had been a deeply personal betrayal. For decades, he had loyally served the Turkmen court. He’d been their fixer, their wheeler-dealer, their expert on all things oil. It had been his task to negotiate with the oil-hungry Western powers to get the Turks the best deal they could. His position as the middleman had made him fabulously wealthy, but it had been a tiny fraction of the wealth in hard currency, modern technology, and industrial investment he had brought to the Empire. He had high hopes of leveraging his position to buy better treatment for his fellow Armenians, to bring them out of second-class citizenship.

Then the massacres started. The Armenians were not the only ones to suffer. For years, a systematic policy of murder and deportation was carried out against numerous minority populations within the Empire. The Armenians, being one of the most populous, were one of the hardest hit.

Many reasons had been given, but as far as Kelust was concerned, the real reason was that someone had to serve as a scapegoat. The Turkmen government had needed someone to blame for a decade of expensive military failures in Rumelia and the Caucasus, and their ethnic minorities were an easy target.

All his hard-earned prestige and favor with his rulers had dried up overnight. He and his family were forced to flee Istanbul. He’d spent money like water trying to save as many of his people as he could. Tens of thousands of Armenians owed him their lives, and they had been but a drop in the bucket.

The fifteen years since had its share of ups and downs. More ups than downs, if he was being honest. He’d managed to get out most of his wealth, and his real value had always been in his contacts. The Franks, Imperials, Albish, and Americans might not like speaking to each other, but they were all willing to talk to the friendly Armenian who had done so much for them before. He’d continued playing the middleman between industrial giants and collecting his percentage, until his assets had expanded to the point where he could sit at their table as an equal.

But he had never forgotten his roots, and even as he expanded his interests, he’d always kept an eye out for the chance to pay back the empire that had treated him so shabbily. Which led him here and now, to a luxurious conference room in Londinium. Seated around the large table were representatives of all the biggest oil exploration companies from America, Albion, Francois, and Ildoa. It was he who had brought them together, for arguably one of the greatest business agreements in modern history - an agreement on how to best exploit the vast oil reserves within the Turkmen empire.

He smiled around the table. “So, gentlemen, are we agreed in principle? From this moment on, we will move jointly on any exploration and utilization of oil resources in Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and the Arabian Peninsula?”

“Sounds good to me. I’m plumb tired of them ragheads trying to play us off each other. It’s about time they learn to put up or shut up,” replied the American lead representative.

“I’d still have preferred it if we could have gotten the Empire on-board,” muttered the man from the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. “As it is, they could monopolize the Turkmen oil by outbidding us.”

“They can try,” agreed Kelust. “But they are operating under certain limits. The Prussian Empire possesses neither our markets nor our expertise. Sooner or later, the Turkmen must agree to cooperate with us, if they want to reach our customers. And once they do, the Prussians may very well join us, if only to take advantage of our prices.”

“And if they decide to get stubborn? They’re already selling to the Empire. They could keep themselves going on just that much, and wait for us to give in.”

“Fortunately, there is a simple answer.” Kelust walked up to a large map on the wall depicting the Middle East and Persia. Taking out a green marker, he drew a border circling the Arabian Peninsula and Mesopotamia. Conspicuously left out was the Turkmen Empire’s heartland of Anatolia.

Firmly slapping the cap back on the pen, Kelust pointed at the map. “The Turks have been slowly losing their grip outside their homeland in Anatolia for years. All these regions represent areas that have been chafing against their influence.” Nodding in acknowledgement to the Anglo-Persian Oil rep, he continued, “Albion has already become the *de facto* protectors of the Omani sultanate, and thanks to your company we have made solid inroads into the Trucal States. With a little bit of effort, we can pry away the rest.”

Kelust focused on keeping his breathing even. This was it. The moment of truth. These men before him were not mere company executives. With the vital strategic importance of oil, each of them were effectively representatives of their national interest. Much like the trading companies of yesteryear, these were the new empire-builders, the seekers of the black gold. And when you started a gold rush… someone was bound to get trampled.

“Can you actually do it?” asked the American.

Kelust had to fight from grinning. “I worked in these areas for years. Even now, I know most of the players. It will take time to do it discreetly, but give it a year or two, and all of Arabia will be struck by a wave of revolution. Revolutions that will need arms and funding. Good thing the new would-be emirs are all sitting on something very valuable, yes?”

The Frank spoke up at that point. “You act as if this is already our only option. Surely this is only a last resort?”

“Of course,” agreed Kelust genially. “Really, it will be simpler for all of us if the Turks agree to cooperate with us. Fortunately, I still have many friends in the court. As soon as they realize the strength of our bloc, they should be eager to expedite matters.”

*Except they won’t. I’ll make sure of it.* Kelust kept that thought private. Instead his voice grew mournful, “However, I know, none better, just how volatile Turkmen politics can be. It is entirely possible they will choose to be intransigent as a point of national pride. If they do… well, the truth is, we need that oil. The world needs that oil. The prosperity of your various nations may very well depend on it.”

Looking around, Kelust held out his hands helplessly. “At the end of the day, I am just your agent. Should you choose otherwise, should you decide your countries can afford the luxury of allowing the Turkmen to be stubborn… I am but your servant. What will it be, gentlemen?”

As he looked on, Kelust could see the appeal to patriotism doing its work. Which was ironic, because he was confident there wasn’t a single patriotic bone within any one of his fellow oilmen. What there was, however, was greed, entitlement, and arrogance. All they had lacked was a fig leaf. Now they were no longer greedy bastards planning to foment rebellion to get their way. They were patriots looking out for the best interest of their respective countries.

Slowly, then more quickly, the decisions were made. Kelust Gulbenk would represent their consortium to the Turkmen court. There, he would do his best to get the Turkmen to cooperate with their requirements. And if the worst should happen and they refused, then their representative was to undertake a tour of the region to seek out “local business partners”.

Kelust had to remind himself that he shouldn’t celebrate prematurely. Now came arguably the trickiest part of the whole exercise. He would have to spend months, perhaps years in Istanbul. Pretending to do his best to get the Turkmen to sign on, while secretly working to ensure they didn’t. And then he’d have to start fomenting rebellion within the Empire, while not getting caught. At least he could expect the help of Albion’s intelligence service for that one. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company had a gratifyingly close relationship with their government.

Actually getting into the Turkmen Empire would be relatively straightforward. The pogroms had ended several years ago, so his life wouldn’t be in danger. And no matter how much they might hate his people, the Istanbul court seemed to turn suddenly egalitarian whenever the Armenian in question was wealthy and well-connected.

As Kelust got into his car, he had to fight to keep his hands from shaking. Just a bit more work, and a bit more luck, and within the decade the Turkmen Empire would cease to exist. While he would prefer to attend the execution of every general and politician who signed off on the slaughter of his people, he hadn’t gotten to his current position without recognizing the limits of the possible. The people responsible might be physically out of his reach, so he would satisfy himself by grinding their precious empire into dust under the wheels of progress.

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**November 10, 1931, Ispagnian Angola**

Mary wiped the sweat from her brow. One thing she hadn’t missed about the tropics was the heat. While it could get pretty hot in summer in the Empire, it wasn’t this insufferable sticky mess that left her feeling awful and gross within an hour of taking a bath. And since she didn’t always have time for laundry, half the time she was putting on the same sweat-soaked clothes she’d taken off before her bath. The joys of being forced to travel light.

Sure, they could have hired porters. But considering they were running a secret investigation with a decent chance of people shooting at them, any civilians they brought along were potential liabilities. Putting aside daydreams of swimming pools and butlers with chilled wine, Mary tried to cudgel her tired brain into doing its job and investigating her surroundings.

This was a moderate-sized community, deep inland, about a little over a hundred kilometers from Ispagnian Angola’s north-east border with Imperial Congo. The Ispagnian garrison had been drawn down to almost nothing, most of the soldiers being recalled thanks to the increasingly chaotic political situation in the mother country. But it didn’t seem to have negatively affected the settlement. If anything, the place seemed to be… bustling.

Mary sat back in her chair on the hotel verandah and looked out over the village center, pursing her lips in thought. The years of globe-trotting had taught her how to get a feel for new places, and this one had a definite energy in the air. Not a happy energy either, the kind that came from stable, prosperous societies. No, instead it put her in mind of… yes, that time some years back when they went to Hollywood to interview John Hughes. This place had the same air - opportunity and danger, that could make or break those caught up in the tide. *Boom town*. That was the phrase she was looking for. But there were sharp differences. In Hollywood, the dangers had been mostly economic and social. Here, they were very, very physical.

Every native was armed with at least a knife, and the few white faces glared around suspiciously, hands on their guns. New, hastily constructed shacks hinted at a recent population spike. Unconsciously, Mary slowly ran her tongue out on her lower lip. She could almost *taste* the burnt nitrocellulose in the air. But while there was some fear, more people were moving around with an avaricious gleam in their eye. Particularly the young blacks in the late teens and early twenties. These moved in packs, seemingly on the lookout for something. Hopefully not for her.

Movement caught her eye, and she straightened up as she saw Elya heading for the hotel. She hated to admit it, but Elya was better than her at getting people - particularly men - to open up. And it was a simple fact that a lone woman looked far less threatening than two working together. Even if it did mean having to listen to her Imperial partner’s innuendo-laden debriefings.

Mary wished Paquet could have accompanied them, but the Francois detective was with Captain Strong. They were both still in Europe, following up what few clues existed on the disappearance of Dr. Schugel.

When the Imperial officer joined her at the verandah, Mary immediately knew something was wrong. Elya’s smile was a bit too stiff, and her greeting a bit too proper. It occurred to Mary that the last time she’d seen Elya like this was just after that disastrous run-in with Degurechaff back in the Congo.

“What happened?”

Elya gave her a too-large grin. “Aww, you worried about me?”

Mary rolled her eyes. At least her playing around meant they were in no immediate danger. “I just don’t want to hear you’ve managed to screw up the entire investigation when we’ve barely even started.”

The redhead stuck her nose snootily in the air while waving around a small rucksack. “I will have you know that *I* managed to find definite clues that Cold Steel has in fact been poking their noses into Angola.”

Normally such a declaration would have Mary champing at the bit, but this time all she could hear was the slight, almost unnoticeable, tremble in Elya’s voice. Not knowing what else to do, Mary repeated herself. “What happened?”

“Not much. Not much. Killed a child.” Elya gave a shaky laugh as she ran her hand through her hair.

Mary took a deep breath, double checked the sound-muffling spell, then let a sharp note of command enter her voice. “Start from the beginning, Lieutenant Roth.”

It was one of the many little peculiarities of working with Interpol. Elya might hold a higher military rank than her, but as long as they were wearing their Interpol hats, Mary had seniority. Normally, if Mary tried to lean on that rule, all it would get her was even more teasing from the Imperial. It genuinely worried her that this time the formal tone actually seemed to calm Elya down.

“So… I was asking around for mil-spec gear that might be available for sale. Particularly guns.”

Mary nodded. The whole reason they were in Angola was because of the increasing rumors of armed groups seizing territory along the Angola-Congo border, and foreign military supplies showing up in the Angolan black market. There was absolutely no proof that it had anything to do with Cold Steel… except that a lot of Cold Steel’s operating areas were right on the other side of the border.

“Well, I found some old Mausers, and it looks like the local garrison’s armory leaks like a sieve. Incidentally, the local black market has pretty much stopped accepting pesetas. It’s gold or nothing.”

Mary inclined her head to show she understood. With the chaos in Ispagnia, the peseta had dropped like a rock. It was no surprise that people might start preferring harder currencies.

Elya tapped her finger. “And speaking of gold. I saw people trading in gold dust and rough diamonds. I don’t know if that’s normal or not for this place…” With a quick shake of the head, she got back to her story. “So, anyway, I asked around. Flashed some gold marks. Got a bite.”

She took a deep breath. “The boy I spoke to - around my age - seemed reasonable enough. But the friend he took me to meet decided it would be more fun to rob and rape the dumb white bitch. I wasn’t worried. Trained mage, I figured I’d smack them around a bit, they’d wisen up. Except the second guy. The one who started the mess. Just would not stay down. He pulled a gun. I pulled my knife and put out a mage blade. He ran into it.”

Elya let out a nervous giggle. “I’m serious, Mary. He literally ran right into it. I think he was planning to shove the gun right in my face or something. Not that it matters. You know, they warn us in basic just how sharp those things are, but until you use them… You know, his body weight was enough for the blade to carve right through him as he fell? Blood *everywhere*. Not on me though. Lucky, that. The others were shouting so much… I don't think they even heard me telling them to surrender. One dug out a sub-gun. Rapid-fire weapon… I panicked. Swung at his head. Got stuck halfway into his skull.”

There was a deep breath, and all amusement vanished from Elya’s voice. “There was a third one there. A boy. Younger than me when I was first conscripted. Think he might have been related to one of the others. Doesn’t matter. He was screaming and swinging at me with a small axe. Out of his mind with fear. He was not a threat at all. I could have disarmed him easily. But all I saw was that axe coming at me. I stabbed him. Right between the eyes. And you know what was the first thing that came to me, after he was dead? *Thank God it’s quiet, now I can think.*”

Mary swallowed. She remembered Elya saying how she’d never faced actual combat during the war. These would be her first kills. A pair of armed thugs, and a child who fell in with them. Mary had never thought she would ever be in a position where she’d want to comfort the other woman, but she did her best. “Even if he was not a threat, he was still trying to kill you. It still counts as self-defense.”

“Does it? Does it really?”

“I think it does.” Mary replied, trying to put as much conviction in her voice as she could.

“And what if I disagree?”

“That’s between you and God, Elya. Besides, I’ve hardly got room to judge. I signed up to hunt down a twelve-year-old.”

“Hah. So you admit you only joined Interpol because of your revenge hard-on for Degurechaff.”

“Do not *ever* say it that way again.”

The both shared a laugh, because it was either that or cry, and both of them were too proud to cry in public. The tasteless joking seemed to have settled Elya somewhat, because she continued in a more normal voice. “No one got a shot off, but there had been a lot of screaming. I tossed on a disguise, grabbed what I came for, and here I am.”

“We’re damn lucky this place is out of magic detection range,” noted Mary. “What did you get anyway?”

Elya reached into the pack. “That sub-gun I mentioned? Here. Look familiar?”

Mary’s eyes widened as she looked down at the stubby little weapon. It was, in fact, quite familiar, if only from photographs. “The Scorpion machine pistol,” she whispered. “This proves Cold Steel has a hand in here somewhere.”

“Them or Velvet Iron. Most likely Cold Steel though,” agreed Elya. “From the few things they let drop, there’s a definite trickle of these coming in from somewhere on the other side of the border.”

Mary listened quietly as her fingers fiddled with the weapon’s mechanisms. After a few seconds, she’d ejected the magazine and the chambered round. Examining the cartridge, she noted it as 9mm Luger, then moved on to examine the weapon. Looking down the barrel, she grimaced. “This thing is filthy.”

“Yeah, weapon maintenance didn’t seem high on the list of priorities for those fools,” sighed Elya. “Bunch of young idiots. God knows how they even got their hands on this piece.”

“Spare mags?” asked Mary.

“Didn’t find any.” Elya seemed to have calmed down some, and was now looking at the gun with interest. “So, most likely our favorite robber barons are poking their noses into Angola. The real question though, who’s pulling the strings?”

That really was the big question. The months they’d spent tracking stock movements in Berun indicated that Cold Steel - and most likely Degurechaff - had been initially bankrolled by mysterious entities in Waldstatten. But after the company went public a lot of stock got privately bought up by powerful figures in the Empire, Albion, and the Americas. Trying to figure out exactly who was in charge anymore was extremely tricky, with half a dozen large shareholders. Which made it doubly important to figure out why Cold Steel was pushing into Angola. Because Cold Steel had absolutely no official permission to operate in Ispagnian territory, which was a far cry from the pretense of legality they were usually so careful to maintain.

Yes, officially, there was nothing linking this gun to Cold Steel. Mary was sure their lawyers would happily point out that the Scorpion was available for sale in multiple countries. And she was also sure they’d be hiding behind third parties and cat’s-paws for their Angolan adventure.

Yet, it was still a departure from their usual methods. Particularly with their usual hatchet-woman, Degurechaff, suspected to be far away in the Turkmen Empire. Profit was always a motive, but as the fall of the previous Imperial Chancellor had shown, Cold Steel’s activities can and did have a political component. So why Angola? Ispagnia was perhaps the only major European power that had been completely uninvolved in the great war and its aftermath. It didn’t seem like a target for Degurechaff. Could this be the power behind the Imperial fugitive, finally showing their hand?

“We’re not seeing it, but there has to be a reason someone wants trouble in this colony,” she murmured to Elya.

“Or they could just want money,” Elya answered. “From what I saw there’s a lot of valuable stuff hidden in the river valleys up north.”

“You think it’s that simple?”

“Be nice if it was.”

Mary huffed, then looked out at the settlement. “We’re going to have to head into the border areas, aren’t we?”

Elya nodded somberly. Mary glanced at her and asked, “Will you be alright? This whole trip is pushing the edge of our remit. If you want we can back out…” she stopped at Elya’s scowl.

“I’m not fragile, Sioux,” the redhead growled. “I’ll get over it. And this is big. If we’re right, someone’s just started a proxy war. We’re Interpol. It’s our job to poke our noses into messes like this. No matter how bad it stinks.”

Mary lifted her hands in surrender. “All right, all right. So, what next?”

“You clean up the gun. I’ll see if I can find more ammo for it.”

“We’re using it?”

“Not much use as evidence, is it? And it’ll be more useful than our Colts if we run into people meaning us harm.”

Mary considered this for a moment, then told Elya, “See if you can find another one. And some spare mags. And try not to kill anyone else while you’re at it.”

“I changed my mind. You can go black market shopping. I’ll clean this one up.”

The next few minutes of bickering didn’t quite dissipate the tension. But it did settle Mary’s mind. She’d already seen the trouble armed natives could cause in the Congo, but the situation in Angola seemed much larger in scope. Degurechaff herself might not be directly involved, but she felt certain it was all part of the same weave. They just had to find the right string and start tugging.

Aiming down the newly cleaned Scorpion, she pulled the trigger. The action cycled with a very satisfying *click*.