

Chapter 42

IN ONE PIECE

The fire burned fast for about three minutes—enough to send up a thick, smelly cloud. The camp went into a panic, with the guard playing the role of discovering hero, directing the women who fought the fire with buckets of water and dust. After the fire was out, the guard returned to duty, but decided to stand a bit further away from the door now, his hand on his weapon at all times, casting furtive glances at his prisoners.

After the fire, Davey felt a bit better, now that he had done something real to help himself and got away with it. But after a while, he began to pace the hut again, clasping his hand and pulling an imaginary trigger. “What the fuck,” seemed to be the only words that he could find to adequately describe how he felt.

Nobody told him it was going to be like this. What was he going to tell his buddies, the folks that put up the cash, when he got back to the Old Blind Bull? *If* he made it back? That he saw some dude get cut up, because the guy had left with his gun and his girlfriend, after some drunk, lunatic leader gave her to him for sex? That he should have killed him maybe, or not?

This was all local stuff, he realized, no big international conspiracy to take everybody’s guns away. Right now, he wished that there were such a conspiracy. As far as he was concerned, *let* them take Christmas’ guns and knives too, so they could walk out of here and go home. Go home to Vicky Jane, to his Winnebago.

Davey looked out the opening. Still nothing going on. Every five minutes, he shuddered a bit, like a wet dog, hoping to shake off the weight of his unwanted memories. Like this Oliver dude, he should focus on getting out of there.

Throughout the day, they had talked a little, and it hadn’t dawned on him until late in the conversation that *this* was the son of the man whose funeral he had read about, who had organized this Garden of Peace thing with the hot movie star. The guy, in fact, who had been the whole reason for him being here in the first place. Oliver had told him a few things about his father’s life and death.

Turns out this wasn’t a bad guy after all. Davey had thought that all these do-gooders were misguided folks, who were serving some crazy master plan, but the dad, Johan, from what his son had told him, seemed to have had his feet on the ground. Like helping farmers make money. That was the kind of stuff that they could use back home as well. They shared a laugh when Oliver explained the whole thistle story and how Johan had helped set up an industry around a totally useless product by playing on the despair of vain old men who would try anything to grow hair. Still, Davey wasn’t entirely convinced that these GAPI folks didn’t have another sinister and hidden motive, but so far, he hadn’t seen any real evidence of that.

“Aren’t they trying to establish some sort of world order, like what they call *stability* and set up their own courts and stuff?” Davey demanded.

“You serious? I’d say that even big and powerful governments can’t keep things stable in their own backyard. And an outfit like GAPI needs money from those governments to do the stuff they do *on behalf* of these governments. Hell, if they don’t like what GAPI is doing, they simply stop giving them money, close the tap, and then they’re dead in the water. I’m a banker, you know, and in my experience, if you want to find out what’s happening you should follow the money.”

“So, you tell me then, Oliver—where is the money going to?”

“Down the drain, in this case. Hold on. You hear that?”

“Shit, something is going on,” Davey whispered after he heard the sounds of vehicles and people shouting.

Davey looked out the window to see more while Oliver checked the holes in the walls. A procession of official-looking men, some uniformed, some in civilian clothes, were entering the camp under escort from Christmas’ fighters. They were walking toward the center of the camp where the night before Christmas had staged his macabre celebration.

“I know some of them, Davey.”

Davey looked at Oliver with some surprise.

“One of them, the fat guy, is Colonel Neptune. He’s military intelligence. The tall man walking in front of him behaves like his boss. Maybe it’s Brigadier Grachev himself.”

Oliver searched his memory for a clue to where he had seen this man before—a man with a fixed smile, who seemed to despise everything and everybody he saw. It would come to him.

“The guy in the white shirt and polished boots is Bruno. He was my father’s boss. He runs the GAPI office back in the City by the Water, and with him is a guy I don’t know. See him, the military type? And there you have Ibrahim, a friend of mine. Was a friend of my dad’s too. Jesus, it’s quite the delegation. They need to see me. Now.”

Oliver got up and walked outside, ignoring the push by the angry guard. Davey followed in his wake.

“Hey, Ibrahim, we’re here!”

Oliver waved and managed to get everybody’s attention. They seemed relieved, rather than surprised, to see him, except for V-6, who emerged from the group of fighters with his weapon angrily pointed at Oliver.

He walked toward the hut, cocked his weapon, and issued a simple instruction in a low voice. “Get inside, stay, or I’ll shoot you now.”

Oliver and Davey thought it better not to argue with V-6 and went inside.

“You see? This was good. I bet you anything that we’re at least part of the reason these people are here, and now they know we’re alive and nearby. Do you think they saw the smoke?”

Oliver looked outside and saw Neptune’s boss give instructions to Christmas’ fighters. This was a man who was used to being in command and whose command should not be doubted. Through the murmur of the fighters setting chairs near Christmas’ throne, Oliver could make out the word “excellency” a few times. Where was the last time he heard someone addressed by that title? The airport, when he arrived the first time. Yes, that was him, Grachev. He’d shared a flight with him. What was he doing here?

Christmas arrived at the meeting and took his throne. Oliver and Davey couldn’t hear what was being discussed. Grachev did most of the talking. Bruno was sitting on the edge of his seat, clearly wanting to speak, but every time he started a sentence, Grachev raised his hand and cut him off.

When he was finally allowed to speak, he must’ve made a good point, because everybody but Christmas was nodding in approval. Bruno tapped the thigh of the military type next to him, who got up and walked toward the prisoner’s hut.

“How are you two gentlemen doing? Healthy? In one piece?”

“We’re good, thank you. Who are you?” Oliver asked of the man who eyed them up and down with a look that mixed concern with amusement. Oliver and Davey saw nothing to be amused about.

“Tom Jenkins. I handle security for GAPI. I knew your dad well, Oliver. He was a good guy. And what’s your name, kid?”

“Davey.”

“Well, Davey and Oliver, I don’t know what the fuck you think you were doing here, but we’re going to get you out sooner rather than later.”

“What do you mean?” Davey asked anxiously. “I have this dude Prosper, who was coming to take me back. Are you now taking us back?”

“Yeah, Davey, but not right away. You’re in the middle of a big game that was really none of your business, but now you’re in the middle of it as Christmas’ hostages—or guests, if that’s what you prefer. You two ladies are what are stopping the army from coming in here and killing everybody. Christmas sent us a postcard, nice picture with the two of you and him in the middle, plus the message that he would kill you both if the army got any closer.”

“Shit,” Davey concluded.

“Deep shit,” Tom countered. “So, you two stay here and behave. Don’t make any more fires, if that was indeed you.”

Davey and Oliver nodded in unison, trying to smile modestly.

“That was bloody helpful, by the way. Really pissed Christmas off too. So, I’m going to go back and confirm that you’re OK, although I frankly believe that you are both fucking crazy. Oh, yes, and Oliver, Vashti says hello.”

Oliver bowed his head and said nothing. Hearing Vashti’s name somehow didn’t make him feel better. It made him nauseous with a guilt and shame that he couldn’t explain to himself. Tom was right, of course. He had been a fucking idiot. He hoped nobody had told his family about his predicament. Maybe he could get out of here before this came out and made everybody back home worry, perhaps over nothing.

“Oliver, you think we’ll get of here? What do they want from us?”

“I think it’s our lives in exchange for Christmas’ freedom. That’s what they want. His whole murderous outfit will disappear into the jungle once again, and we’ll live happily ever after. Clever man, Christmas.”

“How come?”

“My bet is that if he had just told the *army* he had taken us hostage, they would have come in anyway and killed everybody. And if there happened to be two foreigners as collateral damage, well, they could say that they didn’t know and that we shouldn’t have been here in the first place—our own bloody fault for walking in here like we did.”

“So why didn’t they do that? Just kill us with the rest?”

“Because he made it international by copying GAPI on the picture. These GAPI guys have a reputation to protect and, in a way, I’m here because of them. Long story, Dave, but I told you some of it, about my father. But the bottom line is that *now* the army knows full well that we’re here and, at least in my case, knows *why* I’m here as well. And they know that GAPI knows I’m here. Killing me, and you, would cause all sorts of exposure and trouble that they don’t want, mainly because it’s bad for business. In a way, Christmas saved our lives and maybe his own by taking us hostage—you realize that?”

“I don’t understand. What business you talking about?”

“You don’t want to know, kid. Look, Tom is coming back. They’re breaking up the meeting, it seems.”

Tom walked up to, but stayed outside, the tent. “Why don’t you two gentlemen come outside and stretch your legs a bit? They’ve called for a break, so I thought I’d keep you company for a bit.”

This was a welcome offer, and both of them stepped outside. Oliver did a few stretching exercises—not that he felt that he needed it, but just to do something normal, something he would have done at home.

As he was doing his stretching, he asked Tom who the man in charge was.

“Grachev, real heavyweight. He runs half the country and most of its money. Military intelligence chief.”

“Thought so. I heard about him. I can see Grachev talking to Christmas, just the two of them under the tree. Is that a good thing?”

“Could be. Ultimately, it’s these two who decide, anyway. Bruno has nothing to say in this matter, but he came along because his headquarters told him to ‘do his utmost to secure your release.’ Not sure if he gives a fuck, though. He’s really pissed off about the whole thing—first your father, now you.”

“So, what do they want? What’s the deal they’re talking about?” Davey asked, while he scratched his arms.

“Simple. You walk, Christmas walks, and the army walks. Everybody walks. They’re just haggling over how much luggage they’ll take on the trip. Speaking of which...”

“Looks like it’s heavy. What’s in it—ammunition or something?” Davey was commenting on a small bag, like the kind used as cabin luggage, being brought up by a fighter to the two men talking under the tree.

“That would be gold, my young friend. About half a million, I’d say, from the way that guy is dragging the bag around. Price Christmas has to pay to be left alone and live. Grachev’s personal fee,” Tom said in a cynical tone. “Bastard. He always gets away like this,” Tom concluded while looking at the ground, kicking an imaginary rock.

Grachev summoned a motorbike and had the bag fixed on the rear seat. He shook hands with Christmas and patted him on the shoulder. The meeting was over. Grachev turned away from Christmas and walked toward the three men in the hut, followed by Neptune, who had a hard time keeping up. Grachev stopped in front of the two foreigners and looked at them harshly.

“You are free. Now, go with Bruno, and never come back to this country again. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Sir,” Davey stammered.

Oliver didn’t respond. He couldn’t promise he would never come back, not now.

Grachev looked him in the eyes and repeated himself.

“Is that understood, Oliver? I do not like repeating myself.”

“Neither do I, Sir, but I will anyway. Who killed my father?”

“You have some balls talking to me like that.”

“People tell me that if there’s anyone who might know, it would be you, and I might not see you again after today. I had to ask. With all due respect, Sir.”

“Forget it, son. I can’t tell you, because I don’t know. It’s better if you let it go. Now get your stuff. We’re leaving. We have a helicopter half an hour’s drive from here. By the time it takes off, this camp will be gone.”

Grachev turned around to a panting Neptune.

“Neptune,” Grachev ordered. “Give the man his phone back, as promised, in the same state as before.”

Neptune pulled Johan's smartphone out of a breast pocket. It was wet with perspiration but otherwise looked unscathed. He handed it to Oliver and explained that its battery was flat.

"You'll see it's working fine once you charge it. In fact, it was really helpful in pinning down Christmas' location and finding you guys. Couldn't have come here without the information on this thing. And then there was the smoke, of course."

Grachev looked at Neptune impatiently, turned around and walked toward a group of waiting motos, Neptune waddling behind him. The camp had turned into an ants' nest where everybody was collecting goods, clothes, pots and pans, weapons, and ammunition. They were lining up at the dark side of the village where the forest canopy hung over the dirt.

Davey could see some of the fighters cutting a path in the undergrowth. Christmas had disappeared from the scene altogether. Davey heard the motos revving their engines and hurried to take the rear seat of the nearest bike, so he would be sure of his place. He really needed to leave and never visit this shithole again.

Tom and Oliver walked together to the waiting motos. Oliver kept shaking his head.

"That was gutsy, Oliver," Tom said, putting his hand on Oliver's shoulder.

"It's all too fucking surreal, don't you think?" Oliver said emphatically. "I shouldn't be here; neither should you. We shouldn't be having this conversation. I should never have met Christmas or Grachev or poor Davey."

"Well, not sure if it's any consolation, brother, but I used to have this drill sergeant called Duck Bill, who had all these crazy expressions. He used to say that 'If it ain't surreal, it isn't happening,' and as far as I'm concerned, this applies right here, right now."

"That doesn't make any sense at all," Oliver said under his breath while he climbed on the bike.

It hit him later in the day, as he looked out through the open door of the helicopter and watched the shadow of the helicopter dance and jump over the hills and the trees a thousand feet below, that Duck Bill's paradox actually was dead on. He had been scared—still was, in this flying piece of junk. He had been horrified and excited and felt *relevant*—for a moment, at least. Or was that all in his head? He was loving taking the risks, even if his own life was at stake. All of that *was* happening—all at the same time in these crazy surreal places that he had never been to and would never be in again.

But he had never felt more alive.