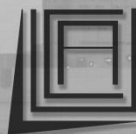


Abdullah Abu Snaineh



NOISY TOYS

Translated from Arabic by
Wajdee Abu Madi



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Original title

ألعاب الكبار



2023

“Justice without force is powerless; force without justice is tyrannical.”

- Blaise Pascal

Whoever works with me is no longer surprised by how deft my thick fingers are at defusing bombs.

It was an old-fashioned time bomb that detonates by a timer. It was planted underneath one of the cars my boss occasionally uses. It was only five minutes until it went off, and I still hadn't found a receptor to trigger it remotely.

I don't think using a timer-based bomb to assassinate someone is a smart idea. You're betting big time on the target being near the bomb when it detonates. Anyway, I lay under the car and started disarming the bomb with the help of a fellow called Lorenzo. Had somebody seen us from a distance, they would've thought we were mechanics.

That was the seventh bomb I defused while working for Don Alessandro Rizzi (not counting the tens I defused before he hired me). Disarming a bomb, even old-fashioned ones (or any bomb, for that matter), is nerve-wracking.

Albeit my experience, I still feel anxious for the rest of the day whenever I defuse a bomb because one wrong move might prove deadly.

Don Rizzi has a lot of enemies. He is subjected to multiple assassination attempts monthly. My job is to find bombs and, if found, defuse them. After checking the cars during daylight, the guards keep them under watch and make sure that anyone unauthorized doesn't get near them. Lorenzo, the only one working for Don Rizzi I trust, gives me a hand with that. He trusts me, too, for I saved his life from a bomb that was planted by a terrorist organization on a ship sailing in the middle of rogue waves. Luckily for the passengers, — and for him — I disarmed the bomb a minute before it went off. He has wanted me to teach him how to defuse bombs ever since.

Back to land, exactly to the now-defused bomb that was planted under one of Rizzi's cars, Nicola, Rizzi's bodyguard, headed toward

me and said, — after puffing out smoke in my face — “Good job. It didn't kill you.”

“This cigarette might kill you, though,” I said.

“Don't worry, it's under control. And who's telling me that? The guy who defuses bombs for a living?”

Maybe he was right about that. My job was done, however, and the day had been rough, so I decided to let loose a little before going home. I don't like my wife seeing me stressed out.

I went to a mini-bowling alley roughly a kilometer away from Don Rizzi's mansion. There were few people there. Most of them knew me (and knew that I don't like lengthy conversations). Now and then I hear banter from familiar faces (but not names, mostly) like, “How do you handle the bowling balls with those thick fingers!” and “We have to make balls with bigger holes for you.”

I smile at them when I see my fingertips trying to hold the ball. They might be right, after all.

After a soft drink and a few bowling shots, I headed, before going home, to a convenience store owned by a kind old lady.

“Hello, Angelica,” I said.

Angelica has a gentle smile that comforts you even if you have never met her before. That’s probably why I persisted to buy from her store, or maybe because I felt pity for her. She was completely alone, after all.

“Hello, Giovanni! How’s Aurora?” she said.

“We’re fine. Thank you.”

“How’s work? Are you still sure you don’t want to change it?”

She was talking while preparing my order, which now she does without bothering to ask me about; she’s gotten used to the same stuff I always order.

I ignored her question. She put the bag before me and I handed her the money. “I hope the source of this money changes soon,” she said.

I figured that she didn’t like me working for Don Rizzi. I smiled at her, grabbed my bag, and went to my car.

I put the bag in the passenger seat and held the steering wheel, not starting the car yet. I remembered all the times I checked Rizzi's cars — and my own — looking for bombs and defusing them if found. I’ve never found any bombs on my car, though you had better expect everything when working for one of the bosses of the organized crime families in the city.

Looks like bowling hadn’t done the job that day, because I still felt anxious. So, I started my car and headed home, to the only person who could ease me without saying a word. She’s like the sun: silent, but dispels the

darkness of the night and the sight of her thrills the soul.

Unusual for her, Aurora was waiting for me in the doorway. The door was open, and the living room's light shone from inside, creating a silhouette manifesting her hair reaching down her shoulders, and a baggy dress barely covering her knees. I couldn't make out her features. I walked up to her and noticed she was worried more than ever.

"You look worried!" I told her, still holding the grocery bag.

She always hugs me when I come home. This time, she doesn't.

"I am, and you know why!"

We've had this conversation before. She didn't want me to work as a bomb defuser.

"You can open a small bowling alley. You've always wanted to do that," she suggested.

I went in and put the grocery bag on the table. I turned to her and said, "I can't do that.

That's my job. That's all I know. I can't just quit!"

"Really? Not for me? Not for us?" she said, while gently passing her hand over her abdomen.

Disbelieving, I looked at her stomach and then up at her face. She smiled and nodded yes.

I hurried to hug her as gently as I could because I didn't want to hurt the fetus with my big body. "Sure, honey, I'll find another job!" I said while hugging her. I backed up a little to see her face. The worry is now gone, replaced with relief. I moved strands of hair off her face and kissed her forehead. "You will be an amazing mother."

I felt her tiny hand clasping my left hand. That made me eager for my baby's hand to be touching mine too.

I was waiting for the right time to talk with Alessandro about quitting, but he was taken with playing with his grandson. Rizzi is a

widower; his wife died a few years back. He has one son, called Mateo, and he's about my age. He's not married, either. His wife deserted him when she found out he was unfaithful.

Rizzi noticed I wanted to speak with him privately (at least not with his grandchild around, since his bodyguard, Nicola, is always near him). He told his grandson to hide so the monster doesn't find him. Rizzi usually plays this game with his grandson (in which he counts to ten and the kid must hide), so he can talk privately without making his grandchild feel unwanted. He hurried to hide, and Alessandro stepped toward me.

"I want out," I said, even though Nicola was able to hear.

Alessandro looked at his grandchild's hiding spot then turned to me and asked, "Expecting a baby?"

I nodded yes.

He replied, "I was about to quit all of this myself when Mateo saw the world. But, here I

am. And he almost did the same. It runs in our blood, I'm afraid. I would rather you stay. The choice is yours, however."

"Thank you. Lorenzo is a good guy. I taught him everything I know."

"I'm sure you did, but I prefer to hire a guy with a longer experience."

Nicola got closer and asked, "What are you going to do next?" he then puffed out smoke at my face, as usual.

"I'll fend for myself. And I already told you smoking harms your health. This time I am saying it while not disarming a bomb," I said.

"I will not be considering that."

While leaving, I heard Rizzi's grandson calling out from his hiding spot, "Where are you, Grandpa? Has the monster gone blind?" He then laughed innocently in a way that made me surer of quitting.

There's an old, empty store not far from my house. I rented it and started renovating it to suit a small bowling alley. Aurora offered help, but I didn't want to risk her getting too tired.

On my way home after day one of the rejuvenation, I went to Angelica's; there were still wet paint spots on my clothes.

She smiled and congratulated me on my new occupation.

“But it's not done yet.”

“However, you are beginning to appreciate the real value of things and people, and this deserves congratulation.”

“Thanks.”

“I am ready to give up everything to have a family. But here I am, taking care of apples instead.”

She finished with a feigned smile. I felt pity for her. She rolled up her sleeves while picking the apples, and I saw on her wrist a tattoo: two wings, one is black and the other is white.

I kept staring at it before Angelica noticed and rolled down her sleeve, all the while smiling.

Everyone who works (or worked) in organized crime knows that tattoo. I thought to myself it can't be the same one, since a lot of people with names that mean an angel have similar tattoos. That was a fit tattoo for a woman named Angelica.

"Say hi to Aurora," she told me, still wearing the feigned smile.

I nodded and left.

Aurora rushed to kiss me as soon as I got home but stopped when she noticed the paint spots all over me and said, "Maybe after you had a shower!"

"Yeah, sure."

Aurora looked at my face for a few seconds and said, "You look tired."

I nodded and went to take a shower to take the paint off my body, but I couldn't take off

what I felt when I saw that tattoo on Angelica's wrist.

After days of renovation, I went to a bowling alleys equipment store to seal a deal to buy lanes. Before I got inside, I saw Mateo Rizzi — accompanied by a good-looker — leaving a restaurant nearby the store. We said hi and went our ways—me inside and them to his car across the street.

A few moments later, an explosion broke out in the street and hurled me to the ground.

I removed the glass shards off my body, wiped the dust off my face, and stood up to see Mateo's car turned into a charred piece of metal.

My car wasn't seriously damaged, so I drove home hoping Aurora hadn't already heard about the explosion.

I saw multiple shadows moving behind the curtains. I thought these belonged to my wife's

friends, coming over to give their congratulations on her pregnancy.

I knocked twice but she didn't answer. I opened the door only to find Alessandro, Nicola, and three others in my living room. I looked left and right for Aurora but found nothing.

"Don't worry about your wife, Giovanni," Alessandro said in a robot-like manner. His face looked as if devoid of blood.

"Where is she?"

"In my mansion. Don't worry about her. Have you heard about Mateo?"

"Yes, my condolences, Don. Who did it, the Morettis?"

Nicola was walking around the room, a cigarette in his mouth. He looked as if he wanted to say something but kept silent.

"Thanks for your condolences. Yes, the Morettis did it. I heard that you were around when the car blew up."

Alessandro didn't wait for an answer.
“What were you doing there?”

“Looking for lanes for my bowling alleys because—”

“We know what you're doing!” Nicola interrupted.

“Then you know I have nothing to do with this! Is Aurora all right?”

“Yes,” Alessandro said, “Aurora is fine, but we're not sure you have anything to do with Mateo's assassination. His assassination only a few days after you quit is justifiably suspicious.”

“Even if I hadn't quit, the explosion happened outside of the mansion. I do the checking inside of the mansion. If he's out someplace far, it's his responsibility to check his car.”

Alessandro nodded in understanding and said, “Makes sense, but I'm still not sure why you were that close to the explosion.”

“I told you. I was looking for lanes—”

“For the bowling alley you’re building, I know that,” Alessandro interrupted, “but how can I be sure? You know what happens to whoever touches a member of the family. Tell me, how can I be sure of your innocence?”

I couldn't find an answer to his question, so I kept silent.

Nicola exhaled smoke, followed its rising motion, and said to Don Rizzi, “He may not be able to prove he’s innocent —although he might be. Thus, He has to prove loyalty by doing what he does best.”

Alessandro nodded in understanding then turned to me and said, "We still haven't buried Mateo — what's left of him, at least —" He paused briefly then continued, "I will bury him when Andrea Moretti dies the way my son did. An eye for an eye. And you're popping that eye! Do you understand? Only then can you take back your wife, and I bury Mateo."

Alessandro motioned his men to leave. He reached the door and said, "The bomb you're

using to kill Andrea will be at your doorstep tomorrow morning.”

I didn't sleep that night. On top of worrying about Aurora, I kept thinking about killing another man. He won't be the first, since I took the life out of three enemy soldiers in the war. But this is different; I know his face and voice, and I am not killing him on the battlefield. All night, I thought about how I will take him from his family to save mine. My job was saving lives by defusing bombs. Now I find myself taking them instead.

The next morning my door was knocked on twice. I opened it to find the bomb and next to it a small file that includes intelligence about Andrea's movements and guards.

It's not easy to get near the son of one of the most dangerous organized crime family bosses in the city. Everyone has a vulnerability,

though, and I found Andrea's: gambling addiction.

It is said that Andrea bets on the opponent team of the one his father supports. This fumes his father to a great degree. Andrea thus gambles relatively in secret and can be found alone in the bookmaker.

It's probably a lost bet for me to watch him heading to or leaving one of the bookmaker's offices, hours after assassinating a foe. I had to hope that his addiction got the better of him.

After further inspection of his movements, I figured he would go to bet in a bookmaker's office near the area from which the team he bets on comes; an area rarely visited by the Morettis.

I waited for him in my car, outside the bookmaker's office. It was a pain in the ass. I had to park away to not attract attention, and the bad weather made it hard to make out faces. It was a rainy day in the middle of spring days

with temperate weather, but I didn't have the privilege to wait another day.

Three hours later, I spotted him heading to the bookmaker's office. I hurried to his car and planted the bomb. I stood some three meters away - separated only by a pothole filled with water due to rain - until Andrea got out.

I stopped him before he got in his car. "Don't start the car, Mr. Andrea!"

Andrea looked at me in puzzlement. I pointed at the water, and he jumped back when he noticed the bomb's reflection. "I wouldn't have told you not to start the car if I had wanted to kill you. I'll tell you what's this about and you won't ask questions."

Andrea nodded in agreement. I noticed beads of sweat on his brow despite the cold weather.

"I have a carcass in my car, I'll put it in yours then blow it off. You will lay low for a while. Alessandro Rizzi will think you're dead. Do you understand?"

He nodded in understanding and moved away from his car.

I knew doing that might cause a war between the two families, so I drove quickly to Don Rizzi's mansion to grab Aurora.

I arrived there a little more than an hour later. I breathed a sigh of relief when things were calm.

Almost everyone was inside the mansion, probably because of the bad weather. The security guard who spends most of his time in his booth wasn't around. I rushed into the lobby and found Aurora tied to a chair, still wearing her light floral dress.

"What are you doing?" I angrily asked Alessandro. He was surrounded by a few of his men, their backs turned to stone sculptures leaning on the mansion's walls. Above everyone, a huge chandelier hangs.

The answer was a strong blow on my right temple by one of the men's guns; everything went black.

I didn't wake up until after dark. Aurora, shivering, was tied to a chair, and I to another.

"Are you ok?" she managed to ask despite her chattering teeth.

"What happened?"

Nicola got in the booth before Aurora got the chance to answer my question. He saw me awake and left.

Seconds later, Alessandro was inside the booth, red-faced and his nostrils flaring like the gills of a fish out of water. He reached for me and hit a punch. "You scumbag!" then continued, "Do you think I'm stupid? And you dare to come to my mansion! I would have run away as far as possible if I were you," he screamed in my face.

He obviously knew I hadn't killed Andrea. How so, I didn't know.

"We have informants in airports and travel agencies. When Andrea booked a ticket, we received the news quickly," explained Nicola,

while running his finger through his hair, as if he read my thoughts.

I can't believe I was so gullible that I didn't warn Andrea about that.

Alessandro walked toward me and punched me again. "You want to trick me, asshole? Do you think I am that stupid? I told you I don't forgive whoever touches my family. Now, I won't forgive whoever doesn't take me seriously," he yelled.

He turned to Aurora and hit her on the stomach with all his might. She was so exhausted that she only managed to mumble a scream. My attempts at getting up were in vain, so I started yelling at him until Nicola punched me in the throat. I spat blood, but I didn't care. Aurora had all of my attention. She lost consciousness. Her face leaned left, covered with strands of hair that were softly moving because of her frail breaths. She would have fallen if she wasn't tied. Alessandro kicked her again in the stomach.

I tried calling her name, but my voice betrayed me. I coughed out blood. When I saw blood spilling down her thigh to the ground, I screamed my lungs out. My screams were mixed with blood. My agonized voice reached the entire mansion, but my body was still locked in place. Moments later, the hair covering Aurora's mouth stopped moving.

Everyone has their own sun, mine was Aurora. When she gloamed, I swore I wouldn't be the only one in the dark. I've always thought sunset would leave me cold, but my sun going dark that way left me in a hot fury.

I worked in bomb defusing for years; I felt like one about to explode. I had to defuse it, or at least delay it going off until guaranteeing maximum damage to my wife and baby's killer.

A minute later, Lorenzo and another guard came in. Lorenzo looked disheartened when he saw Aurora.

"Take her outside," he told the other guard.

Lorenzo approached me, bent with his face set toward the floor, and said, "I'm really sorry!" He looked around the room and stood up. "I'll be back in five," he said after he made sure the other guard took Aurora out.

When Lorenzo came back with the same guard, he had a long piece of cloth, an alcohol container, and a piece of soap. In a voice loud enough that the guard could hear him, said, "These are to clean your wounds. We don't want you to die like that." There was a blade and a lighter among the stuff he brought me. He put them all in my tied hands. He looked at me to make sure I saw each item he brought. I nodded and he covered everything with the cloth. He then stood and told me he will be back with the guard soon.

I taught Lorenzo most of what he knows about bombs. He was looking for a proper spot in the booth to escape from. When he found one, he brought me the stuff needed to make a bomb. It took me a few minutes to untie myself.

Two or three minutes were enough to make a bomb and blow up a hole.

I was lucky to find a small garbage truck passing by the mansion when I got out. I threw my phone away and jumped in the truck.

Going back home or to my under-maintenance bowling alley wasn't an option. Neither was going to a hotel in my current condition. That would have attracted the cops' attention, not to mention Rizzi's informants who could be lurking around hotels. The best option was going to Angelica's.

I had imagined a different reaction from what she showed. She motioned me in as if I were a pizza delivery guy, not a bloodied, beaten-up person she knows.

"You will tell me all of it when you take a hot bath," she told me in a firm, but gentle tone.

Angelica didn't utter a word until I had finished the whole story, with the help of a hot drink she had prepared for me.

She shook her head when I completed talking and said, “I’m very sorry. What will you do now?”

“He will pay for what he did!”

“How?”

“I’ll find a way.”

“Let me help.”

“You’ve already helped enough. I thank you for it.”

“I can help much more than that.”

“How?”

She rolled up her sleeve and stretched her hand toward me. What I thought I had seen weeks ago was right: a black wing opposite a white wing. A tattoo worn by professional, independent killers. Legend has it that they only kill members of gangs that hurt civilians. Anyhow, they discontinued their work years ago.

“Follow me,” she ordered while standing up with agility unusual to those her age.

I couldn't believe how anyone would sleep in her bedroom; there were guns about everywhere.

“I thought you quit!” I marveled.

“There are some still working under a different name, and sometimes we help them,” Angelica paused for a while then said, “I want to spend my time doing something else, though. The social services wouldn’t accept my application to adopt an orphan, unfortunately.”

“Unbelievable! You’re actually an angel. An angel of mercy for doing that. An angel of death, too, after a second look at your past, and all those guns.”

“This kind of explains the tattoo, Giovanni. One side is deadly, the other merciful. Sometimes they meet,” she petted my shoulder and went back to her chair.

That wasn’t the limit of Angelica’s help. I also asked her to call Lorenzo from her cell phone.

He told me that he had buried my wife in the backyard of his family's house.

“They're outside the country. Nobody's home. You can visit her grave if you get a chance.”

I went there before midnight in a taxi. I asked the cab driver to drop me roughly a hundred meters away from the house; better safe than sorry. I kept watch for a few minutes and headed to the backyard when I was sure it was safe.

A huge cloud covered the moon. Lifeless shadows overwhelmed the ground. My body moved slowly, like a phantom in the dark. When I saw Aurora's burial spot, my steps grew heavier. There was dug-up soil by the edge of the backyard, where some flowers - still growing - were left untouched by Lorenzo. Mine was beneath the ground, and whoever plucked it will be punished.

I wish it were all a nightmare. I wasn't having a nightmare, but living it. I will be this

very nightmare to those responsible for what happened to my wife and baby.

I sagged down to her grave and prayed to God to forgive her sins. Perhaps her sin was accepting one like me! The time I spent with her was God's blessing, so I thanked Him, praying, "Thank you, God, for your numerous gifts, even if we wish them to last longer, but it is your will I obey. You grant and take. I pray that Aurora is in a better place," I stopped praying for some time and looked at the ground. I wondered if I were really honest because I would have done anything to take her back.

Life and death! What lies in between? The dust - the origin of human creation - is embracing death now. Some regard them as two opposite concepts. I see them as one, their faces turned away from each other like two sides of the same coin. I went on, "Oh Lord God, you know what I say and think. You, who order justice, allow me to be your tool. We must eliminate the injustice you order us not to do. I

will not be angry, and I will not take revenge for myself. Avenging my wife is not my end but my beginning. I will rain your fury on the unjust. Please, Lord, aid me in doing that!”

I got up and realized I was holding my wedding ring the entire time.

Organized crime families have an unwritten law: you reap what you sow. I was betting on that tradition to start a war between the Rizzis and the Morettis.

My plan was to shoot at Moretti’s mansion, then wait for retribution from his men against Rizzi’s in the same manner. Meanwhile, Lorenzo will randomly blow up the security cameras. Rizzi’s men would think bullets took them down.

Moretti's men, while in their cars, will fire their guns at two sides of the mansion, leaving two other sides safe for my entry. The guards would be busy shooting back. I was betting on

Alessandro being in his big safe, which is located in his room on the second floor.

An hour later, Moretti's men showed up and started firing at Rizzi's. My weapons of choice were: a rifle, two pistols, a few grenades, and a knife.

Lorenzo started blowing up the security cameras remotely, fifty meters away from the mansion.

When I was sure the cameras surveilling the side I chose for my entry were taken down, I got out of Aurora's car.

I stayed low to avoid detection. The bullets being fired were relatively high because there is a wall surrounding the mansion. You will have to aim high to hit the mansion.

I saw a few guards going down. I glanced around, looking for Nicola, but found nothing.

Before reaching the mansion's lobby door, I spotted a guard with his back facing me. I

didn't want to shoot him in the back and attract the other guards' attention. I sneaked behind him and slit his throat with a quick, slick move. I held his body from hitting the ground and made sure the guards didn't notice me.

My initial plan was to get in the mansion, finish the job, and then signal Lorenzo to blow up the guard's booth to distract the guards and use the same side I came in from to escape. I brought smoke grenades to cover my way out.

I saw a guard the moment I came in the door. I shot him dead using my silenced pistol.

The bullets of Moretti's men were hacking through the mansion's windows and the massive chandelier that hangs in the middle of the lobby. And shards were falling like rain. I took cover next to one of the stone statues.

I looked toward the stairs leading to the second floor. There were no guards. I skipped to another statue to take cover from the falling shards. A skinny guard surprised me and fired his gun. The bullet scratched my thigh. I shot

him in the head before he got a chance to fire again. He bounced from the statue to me. To my surprise, a few bullets hacked his body. I glanced over his shoulder to see the shooter coming at me in the middle of the lobby. The dead guard's body was not enough to cover my big figure. The shooter realized this and changed his line of sight and shot me three times, hitting me in the right-side chest. I had a bulletproof vest on, but I almost fainted from the shock.

“I never liked you, Giovanni!” the guard said while walking toward me and replacing the empty magazine. “Mr. Nobody, can't you see we are busy with matters more important than you?” he sneered in a voice higher in pitch than the bullets whizzing by.

He aimed his gun at me as he completed his rant. Abruptly the massive chandelier gave up and fell upon him.

“Thank you for your intervention, Lord!” I grabbed my gun and headed toward the stairs.

I felt my chest tightening. My legs were throbbing with pain. I was limping into Alessandro's room. Only two meters away from Rizzi's room. Nicola suddenly swung from behind the door and shot me twice with his tiny pistol. The bullets landed in the right shoulder and chest. I stayed on my feet. Blood started seeping from my shoulder. I probed my hand over the bullet wound. It was boiling hot.

I had a second gun in my holster, but I knew I couldn't draw it and shoot fast enough. Nicola knew that, too.

Nicola could have shot me again. Instead, he pulled the cigarette out of his mouth (and puffed out smoke at me, of course) then said, "I didn't think you'd die from a gunshot. Don't get me wrong, I don't mind you dying anyway whatsoever, but I thought you'd die in an explosion. Funny you were warning me about smoking. Too bad for you, there was no one to warn you about me. Your life is in my hands now." Nicola put the cigarette back between his

lips and produced a liquor flask. “To your death!” he said mockingly, the cigarette still in his mouth.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’ll die in a bomb explosion.”

While I was holding my right shoulder, I pulled a small bomb I hid earlier in the backside of my vest. I threw it in front of him. Nicola and I jumped back. The blast wasn’t very powerful, but it hurled us further to the back. I glanced at Nicola to see his gun and metal flask on the ground next to him. Somehow, he still had the cigarette between his lips.

I got up, drew my gun with my left hand, and shot him in the knees. I picked up the liquor flask and said, “Drinking alcohol is as harmful as smoking.” I poured the drink on his face. Slowly, it started burning. I spilled the rest of the drink on his chest, and it, too, caught fire.

Nicola was screeching when I got inside Alessandro’s room.

I stood before the huge safe. I wanted to blow up the lock and throw in a smoke grenade. However, I changed my mind when I heard his grandson's voice inside.

I heard the diminishing sound of the shootout and realized I didn't have much time left. I was losing a lot of blood, too.

Alessandro is hiding with his grandson. Nothing else matters now.

He was going to get out sooner or later, but the blood drops dripping from my shoulder on the floor were like a ticking clock, reminding me of how little time I had left.

I turned back to Nicola's body. I searched for his phone, hoping it didn't break. Luckily, it didn't. I called Alessandro and told him in a Nicola-like tone, "The situation is under control!"

I waited next to the safe's door. He went out covering his grandson with his hand. I hit Alessandro in the temple with the back of my pistol and he dropped down.

“This game is for adults. Let’s play one, but this time you close your eyes and do not open them until I tell you so. You will be the monster looking for me. Ok?” I told the kid while keeping watch on Alessandro. The kid shook his head cheerfully and closed his eyes.

I turned again to the grandfather who was struggling to get up.

My vision was going blurry. I couldn’t feel my right hand.

I balled my left fist and punched him repeatedly in the nose and temple. My wedding ring was close to becoming part of the flesh of my finger.

My fist was a mess of blood. The room was filled with Alessandro’s wailing, trying to call his grandson for help. I interrupted his shrieks and said, “If you open your eyes, kid, you lose!”

Alessandro looked at me, battling to utter something that didn’t leave his throat.

“Do I open my eyes now?” the kid asked.

“Not yet. I’ll tell you when my game with your grandpa is over.”

I suddenly remembered bowling and how much I loved the moments I spent building my alley, aspiring for a calm future with my wife and child. “It’s time to play a bowling game. My kind of game!”

He looked at me questioningly. I dug my index and middle fingers into his eyes. My thumb went in his mouth. I started pressing until I felt something crack in his skull. I didn’t stop until he stopped breathing.

“You’re lucky I did that with my weak hand!” I said to his dead body while removing my fingers from his skull.

The shooting outside halted. There was no sign of Rizzi's guards. I called Lorenzo and asked him to blow up the security booth. When I heard the blast, I told the kid to keep his eyes closed and carried him.

Outside, the mansion was still afire. Smoke filled the lobby. I was holding the kid

with my left hand and the pistol with my right even though I couldn't feel it. A guard was swaying before I reached the main door. He pointed his gun at me. My attempt to aim my gun at him was in vain. My right hand and vision were too weak. Less than a second later, I heard a sound I thought was an explosion. It wasn't.

The guard dropped down by the lobby door. Seconds later, a skinny figure, holding a gun, emerged from the middle of smoke and fire.

The lean figure approached and said, "Always make sure the exit is safe before retreating!" I recognized the voice.

"Angelica!"

"Yeah. I figured you'd need my help."

"Thank you!"

"Thank you too. I feel like a mother by taking care of you! It's the first time I really care about the safety of someone I consider close to me."

“But it won’t be the last.”

“Do I open my eyes now?” the kid asked.

“Not yet,” I answered. “Do you want to feel like a grandma?” I asked Angelica.

She smiled and said, “I’ll meet you at my house. I’ll cover you, now leave!”

She turned and fired at something I couldn’t make out because of the smoke. I heard moaning. She fired again and the moaning ceased.

I tightened my hand around the kid and went out to meet Lorenzo.

Lorenzo suggested going to a friend of his to check my wounds, but I refused and told him to drive to Angelica’s. He drove fast (nevertheless, Angelica was there already). She was wearing her house dress. A cooking smell was coming from the kitchen. She also prepared a first-aid kit.

Despite Angelica's asking him to, Lorenzo didn't wait for dinner. After he left, she asked to see my wounds so she could clean and bandage them, saying, "This will do for now. I have a doctor friend. She will help, no questions asked."

I thanked her for everything. Inside me, I thanked God for living another day.

She looked at the kid and said, "Everything is going to be alright." Then to me, "Do you remember when I told you I wanted to have someone to take care of and give up all of that?" she pointed at her bedroom.

"Do you mean...?" I started saying but stopped when I saw the kid. "Do you mean the noisy toys?"

Angelica laughed and nodded, "Yes, the noisy toys."

"Maybe it's not a good idea to give them up."

"I am not doing it for free, in case you thought so!"

“That wasn’t what I was thinking.”

“Then what were you thinking?”

“I was thinking maybe... I’ll have to play again soon.”



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