

Meeting Mab

The address Ezekiel had for Smith was a tower-block offering cheap town-centre accommodation for essential staff, converted from a failed hotel that had in turn been converted from an office block. It still looked exactly like an office block. As it was owned by the Silbury company and Ezekiel and his partner were Williams Corporation employees they were waiting in a sun-trap of a public car-park across the road for some-one from Silbury's security department to arrive and escort them onto their hallowed property in case they decided to steal the door-handles or set light to the carpet.

Stefano had called Silbury well before they had left the office, reluctantly doing things by the book and, even more reluctantly, being polite and undemanding in the process, and Silbury had promised faithfully they would have some-one already there by the time they arrived. So far they had been waiting for seventeen minutes.

"OK," Stefano said, coming back from wandering through the cars while he phoned Silbury to find out the cause of the delay. Ezekiel guessed this time he had been neither polite nor undemanding. "They say some-one is already on their way, and will be here within three minutes," he reported, sounding satisfied.

"Uh-huh," Ezekiel replied. He knew it had been a wasted phone-call: what else was the Silbury officer going to say? The only benefit of the call as far as he was concerned was that the opportunity to shout at some poor underpaid, overworked operator had, as usual, cheered Stefano up. Stefano had few moments of happiness in his life: he was invariably pessimistic, he thought the worse of every-one he met, and was very much a glass-three-quarters-empty kind of man. Shouting at people was one of his few hobbies.

"Though I don't know why we're bothering. Smith's not going to be there," Stefano grumbled. "I bet he's already moved on."

"Probably," Ezekiel agreed. They had reliable information that the man they wanted to arrest was in the building, but Stefano was not one to allow anything like reliable information stand in the way of his pessimism, and Ezekiel had long since learnt it was easier to agree with all of Stefano's gloomy prognostications than challenge them.

They waited there for a further two minutes, Ezekiel calm and untroubled as he lent against the car, Stefano restless and impatient and unable to stand still.

"Oh, Jesus Christ," Stefano swore, and Ezekiel turned from observing who was going in and out of the building to see what had upset his companion and found him watching a woman sauntering across the car-park in their general direction. She was of average height and average build, wearing cropped trousers and a short jacket and a slightly too flimsy T-shirt, and had her hair cut into a wedge of exuberant curls. She would have been remarkably inoffensive had the bright sunlight not glinted off an ID badge hung round her neck. "They've sent us a fucking trouble-shooter," Stefano said in disgust.

Silbury employed cut-price security officers called trouble-shooters who were fobbed off with all the boring or unpleasant jobs their uniformed colleagues did not want to bother with. Some were police rejects or wannabes, others had criminal records that precluded them from any better work, and others were bullies who liked being paid to boss other people about. Silbury said they had introduced trouble-shooters to release trained police officers for other work; their competitors said they had done it to save a fortune on wages and training.

"Hi, I'm Mab," the woman said with an easy smile as she came to a halt in front of them. "I take it you're the Williams lot."

"I'm Officer Ianich, and you call him Officer Rivers," Stefano replied abruptly, and then turned to Ezekiel. "They've sent us a *trouble-shooter*. I can't believe after all this they've only sent us a trouble-shooter."

“Yeah?” the woman replied, sounding interested. “If you like I can call up the office and get you a proper security officer, if you need some-one to hold your hand in there.”

While Stefano was more than happy to insult others he was never pleased to be insulted back, and Ezekiel casually stepped in front of him five seconds before he laid into her. “That won’t be necessary,” he said, as smoothly as he could while Stefano thumped into his back. The woman just kept grinning at Stefano and raised her eyebrows, not at all intimidated.

Ezekiel had no higher opinion of trouble-shooters than his partner and was wondering at the intelligence of the woman who so casually insulted some-one who was at least twice her body weight and who had a companion to back him up. Stefano seemed to be having the same thought, and it was he who came up with the explanation first.

“Mary, Mother of God,” he blurted out. “She’s one of those new-hires. She’s one of those ex-Islanders Min said Silbury have hired. She’s an ex-Islander. She’s a bloody Charity Islander.”

Mab held out her hands and made a little bow.

Ex-Islanders working as security in his town were even more unwelcome than the usual range of trouble-shooters, but Ezekiel could not make out any track marks on her arms, nor smell alcohol on her breath, nor see horns on her head, and he preferred to reserve judgement on individuals until he knew their capabilities. Stefano had no such inhibitions. “Yeah, lady, I think you better had get on the comm to your office. We *do* want a proper security officer.”

Ezekiel had better things to do than hang about in an oven-hot car-park waiting for Silbury to get round to sending out some-one else to them. “Let’s just get this over with, shall we?” he said. “She’s going to be in our company for ten minutes max. What can she possibly do in ten minutes?”

“Ezekiel -”

“Let’s go,” he said, and walked away.

He led them across the busy street and in through the great glass doors into the foyer that still bore the marble-clad glory of its previous incarnations. They tapped their way across the stone floor to the bank of lifts, only two of which were currently working, and Mab pressed the call button. “You want 857, right?”

“Yes.”

“Who are you after?”

“A man called John Smith,” Ezekiel answered, and then, when Mab looked at him cynically, added: “Straight up.”

“What’s he done?”

“Assaulted a debt-collector.”

“And he ended up here because ...?”

“We’ve been told he’s hiding out with his brother-in-law. His ex-brother-in-law.”

“The man in 857.”

“Yeah.”

The lift arrived and the three of them got in. A resident who had been waiting for a lift suddenly found it imperative to search for something in his shoulder bag and another remembered he needed to check his mail-box, so they travelled up to the eighth floor by themselves.

The low-rent apartments had been created by the simple expedient of knocking a new doorway in the internal wall between two of the hotel rooms. The original plan had been to convert one of the bathrooms to a small kitchen but at some point during the conversion that had proved too expensive and the two bathrooms had been left and a subsidised canteen built in the basement instead. Cooking on the upper floors was supposedly forbidden, but the stale smell of curry, chilli and frying bacon showed the ban was being widely ignored. The pale

grey carpet of the corridor was grubby and worn, and they passed at least one bike, one child's tricycle and a padlocked storage box illegally stored outside front doors.

Mab led them down the corridors and stopped a safe distance away from 857, pointing out the front door and the door beyond it. "That's the one you want. And the next door down is the other door to the apartment. They're supposed to be sealed, but people like opening them up," she explained.

Ezekiel looked down towards the far end of the corridor and the faint glow of an emergency exit sign. "And there's a way out down there?" he asked.

Mab nodded.

"OK. If you don't mind, you go and guard the second door, on the off-chance he decides to try to sneak out. We'll take the front door." Ezekiel compared Mab's size against what he knew of Smith's reported physique, knew she could not stop him unarmed, and glanced over her outfit with sudden doubt. "You are armed, aren't you?"

"Ah, about that," Mab said, unabashed. "I know I'm supposed to be, only Silbury make us supply our own guns and I haven't quite got round to getting one yet."

Stefano sighed theatrically. Ezekiel turned to him. "You take the second door," he ordered, and held up a hand as Stefano opened his mouth to protest. "Not now, Stefano. Let's just get hold of Smith and get out of here."

"Is Smith married?" Mab asked as they watched Stefano trudge down the corridor to the other door.

"Yes."

"Know her name?"

"No idea." Ezekiel and Mab moved up to the other door. "Why?"

Mab smiled at him and rapped on the door with her knuckle. "Mr Smith? Mr Smith?" she called out in a high voice, and then rapped again. Ezekiel shot her a 'what the hell ...?' glare, having expected her to do nothing other than stand by and watch, and rapidly moved to one side of the door. "Mr Smith? It's me, Cindy. Your wife sent me." Mab considered the significance of Ezekiel's move to the side of the door and hastily took her ID badge from round her neck and thrust it in a pocket. She kept up the knocking and calling until she spotted the hint of movement behind the spy hole. "Mr Smith? She asked me to tell you that the police have been round asking questions. And that she's managed to get the money, and -" she tried to lower her voice to a whisper that would still be heard through the door, "- and I've got it with me."

Ezekiel raised one hand in urgent query and Mab simply shrugged cheerfully, but she was rewarded by sounds inside the apartment followed by the cautious opening of the door. "What fucking money?" John Smith asked, half suspicious because he did not know what she was talking about, and half perennially hopeful of a miracle that would instantly solve all his problems.

Ezekiel stepped forward and pushed Smith back into the apartment, one hand firmly on the man's chest and the other holding his ID card in his face. "Williams Security. We need to talk to you, Mr Smith."

"Oh *fuck*," Smith replied with feeling.

The room contained nothing but a single fat armchair, a brand-new director's chair, a large-screen TV and a low table to hold the beer and snacks when the football was on. Ezekiel kept pushing Smith back towards the director's chair and sat him down.

"Hey -" Smith protested, and struggled to get up. Mab followed them through the door and then peeled off to search the rest of the apartment with the due care of some-one unarmed who knew there was likely to be some-one else present. It did not take long to check out the three other rooms but by the time she came back into the living room Stefano had joined

Ezekiel and together they were hand-cuffing an unwilling Smith. Stefano read out his rights in a high-speed monotone while Smith squirmed in the chair.

“Hey, Officer Rivers,” Mab called, digging her comm out of her tight trouser pocket. “This arrest – is it important to you? I mean, to meet some weekly quota or something? Or to keep your boss off your back?”

“No,” he replied suspiciously, looking round from Smith who he had just pushed down into his seat for the third time. “Why?”

“Good,” she said, tapping the screen. “‘Cos I’m about to trump you.” She looked towards the man in the chair. “What’s that man doing in the bath, Mr Smith?” she asked conversationally. “Can I take it he was your brother-in-law?”

“It was his fault,” Smith protested, and Stefano hastily left him to Ezekiel as he pushed past Mab into the other half of the apartment.

“Hi, it’s Mab,” Mab said when her comm call was answered. “You know that assist at King’s Meadows Tower? Well, it’s turned into a homicide. You’d better send a team out.” She listened as whoever was on the other end said something in reply and said: “No, I did not kill any-one.”

Stefano came back as she was putting her comm away, looking satisfied that his low opinion of mankind had been justified yet again. “It’s a D.B. alright,” he said. The body had been dumped unceremoniously into the bath and half-heartedly draped with a towel on the principle of out of sight out of mind.

“You killed your brother-in-law?” Ezekiel asked Smith. “The man who took you in?”

“It’s not as if I meant to kill him,” he said in self-justification. “But he wouldn’t lend me the money, and it pissed me off. He could have afforded it, easy.”

“So you whacked him over the head a few times and dumped him in the bath?” Mab asked, amused.

“No, I didn’t,” Smith answered, insulted. “I only punched him once and he fell and hit his head on the table.”

“You’re saying he fell on his head five times, Mr Smith?”

“He said he was going to go to the police. I was only angry in the first place ‘cos he wouldn’t lend me the money, and *he’s* going to the police to report *me* for assault? That *really* pissed me off. *That’s* when I hit him.”

“Mr Smith, fascinating as all this is, I really think you should shut up now and wait for Silbury security,” Ezekiel advised. “Sit down, will you?”

“We’re not really going to hand this over to Silbury, are we?” Stefano asked him.

“It’s a victim employed by Silbury, in a property owned by Silbury. I’m not fighting that for a mere assault against a debt-collector,” Ezekiel replied. “So yes, we’re handing it over.”

The Silbury response time for a reported murder was a lot more impressive than for organising some-one to escort them into a building and it did not take long for the first wave of Silbury personnel to arrive. The three detectives were wary at first that the Williams’ team would try to claim it, pleased when it was clear they would not, and then resigned when they realised the perpetrator was not only already in custody but had admitted to the murder, and there was nothing left for them to do but the paperwork.

Stefano stood wherever he could subtly be in the way of the detectives or the medical examiner and forensic officers who followed them, so it was left to Ezekiel to take the officers through everything he knew about the case from the assault four days before up to the moment Smith had justified the killing. He officially handed over jurisdiction, signed everything the Silbury officers wanted him to sign, promised them three times to send the file on the assault, and then reclaimed his handcuffs from the prisoner who still sat in the director’s chair looking hard done by.

“Where’s Mab?” Ezekiel asked when he collected Stefano on his way out of the apartment. He did not know if he thought her presumption in joining in on their arrest uninvited admirable or outrageous, but he wanted to at least thank her.

“The trouble-shooter? Left a while back,” the female Silbury detective said. Ezekiel was mildly surprised: most trouble-shooters would have done whatever they could to weasel their way into a murder investigation, even one as straight-forward as this, particularly if they had been the one to find the body.

“Fucking ex-Islander bitch,” Stefano said, not quite under his breath, and the detective stiffened. There was a good chance she actually agreed with Stefano’s opinion of ex-Islanders, but Mab was a Silbury ex-Islander bitch, and she wasn’t about to let a Williams bastard insult one of her own.

Ezekiel forgot about thanking Mab. “Come on,” he said, tugging Stefano by the arm to get him moving before his usual approach to inter-company relations provoked a fight. He had had more than enough of sorting out the aftermath of such incidents in the past. “Let’s go and report the good news.”

Stefano realised there would be plenty of things to complain about when explaining why they had not taken Smith into custody, from the arrival of the trouble-shooter to the presence of the unexpected corpse, and almost cheered up.

“Still think we should have taken the case. Fucking Silburys,” he grumbled, out of habit, and Ezekiel grabbed his arm again and dragged him physically out of the door before any-one could hear him.