

Jane flopped back on top of the almost-comfortable bed in Dubai's equivalent of Motel Six and, for the first time in five years, lit a cigarette.

"That was... *terrible*. Well, not quite. I mean... Let me think for a minute."

Jane smoked half the cigarette while thinking of what to say next. Finally, the words came.

"Being Black Widow again was like taking a trip through time. There's nothing to worry about but me, myself and mine. I've got no husband to fret over, no kid to protect. Survival and staying ahead of the opposition is a lot simpler when flying solo, isn't it?"

"Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't go back to what I was for anything. I *am* happy with what I've got, warts and all. Christ, I haven't been this content since before I erupted. There's a lot to be said *for* having a family, as well as against it, although I'm sure you don't believe me.

"That hour was... *wild* in every sense of the word. Dangerous and exciting and, in hindsight, probably one of the riskiest things I've done recently. Black Widow's left her share of pissed-off people behind her – what if I'd run into one of them? Real fucking smart. But *that* was a risk I'd realized before I let you do your thing," she made a vaguely mysterious gesture in the air above her.

"When I was with the Janissaries, I didn't like myself all that much – boo-hoo, how very psycho-fucking-traumatic, right?" Jane glanced at her companion, who didn't deign to respond. "But I did what I had to in order to get by because the alternatives were starvation and/or being freeze-dried and cut into thin slices by the Directive. Fine, whatever. I didn't like it, I got out when the opportunity presented itself and it's been an upward trend ever since. And that's great."

A bottle clinked against a glass. "I can only assume there's a fucking point to all of this, Jane?"

The husky male voice was filled with slight tension, and a hint of menace. Jane sat up, tossed her smoldering cigarette into a nearby ashtray. "I think I liked it." She admitted in a small voice.

"Think?" Replied the voice - a hint of amusement, now.

"Alright," she snapped. "I *did* like it. There was something clear and uncomplicated about her that appealed so *much*. Like preferring a knife to a gun. Simple, sharp edges and obvious function." She paused to accept a glass of vodka being offered. "And now I feel nauseous and nervous. Like *something's* gone badly wrong, and I don't know what."

"Don't bullshit. You know exactly what's wrong." Now the voice took on a harder edge, uncompromising and unrelenting. Jane's shoulders sagged.

She nodded, reluctance writ large on her face. "I'm afraid that if I have to do it again – revert like that – I won't want to come back. Might even cut and run on you guys."

"That won't happen."

"Are you sure?" Jane asked plaintively.

"Trust me."

Jane had to smile slightly at that. It sounded like a promise intended to be kept.

"Oh, that helps me *loads*." She managed to slip out, her mind playing over the recent events.

"Best I can do. Another cigarette?" The voice softened as a hand proffered a pack of cigarettes to her.

"Might as well. Thanks, Veil."

Silence hung in the air as the smoke from Jane's freshly lit cigarette wound its way towards the ceiling. Veil stepped from the shadows that all but obscured him from view. The light from outside shot into the room, as the blinds made a beveled pattern in the darkness. It was like some scene from a noir movie, and Veil kept waiting on the soundtrack to well up into a crescendo.

"The question is luv..." he leaned close to her ear, his voice almost a whisper, "is whether or not you can control yourself."

Then he stood up, fading back into the darkness to leave Jane sitting there alone with her thoughts.