

Ruby 3

Chapter 15 – The Arturo Problem

“Lily was currently wearing a borrowed karate suit, a Karate gi as the instructor had called it. Well laundered and it fitted reasonably well. The thought that hundreds of sweaty young men had worn it, was a little disconcerting.”

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Charlotte remained in Malou’s hotel in Paris, it seemed the best option. Paris was a better airline hub than Nairobi and Malou’s underworld contacts were worth a hundred of the security staff employed by large hotels. Pablo and his men were still with her, which might annoy Ruby. She’d need them when going after Arturo, which might mean a serious argument with Ruby. So far there had been hints and a few highlights, but she hadn’t told Ruby about definitely accepting Gregor’s contract to get rid of the Arturo problem. Working for Gregor would mean a connection to the cartel and probably a long term business relationship.

“I can almost hear Ruby telling me why it was a bad idea.” She told Malou. “There was no option though, I had to agree. Gregor might be a questionable friend, but he’d definitely be a terrible enemy.”

They were sat in the foyer of the hotel, not far from the reception desk. Coffee and biscuits with Malou was quickly becoming a ritual.

“You should talk to Ruby, she will understand.” Said Malou. “Every child eventually wants to cut the strings with their parents. With Ruby it was George she rebelled against.”

“I’m not rebelling.....I’m going to give the money to Ruby, or at least most of it. I understand the way Ruby works, pulling secrets from people’s heads. I’ve helped George by doing it sometimes.....I just prefer to use my gifts in a more direct way.....A more physical way.”

Malou was right, she was rebelling. It felt so wrong though, so ungrateful after what Ruby had done for her.

“I hate to say I’m older and wiser.” Said Malou. “But you need to talk to Ruby, even if it’s just over the phone. The first mercenaries George hired weren’t sent to help Ruby. They were sent to bring her back, kicking and screaming if that was the only way.”

“Kallina said something about that once.” Said Charlie. “I assumed she was confused... You know Kallina.”

“I don’t know her that well, not really. I do understand the need to flee the nest though, to prove you can survive on your own. Play house too maybe.....I’ve seen the way Pablo looks at you.”

Was Pablo part of it, the headache that refused to let her sleep properly? Ruby definitely wouldn’t approve of Pablo, but she’d had her own fairly wild flings. She’d once had sex with an American girl, a tourist, in the centre of a public park in Vladivostok.

“You’re right Malou, Ruby will probably understand better than I think. I’ll call her later on today.”

Malou actually patted her hand, like a doting grandparent.

“George forbade her to go to Budapest Charlie. It might help to remind her about that.”

“Oh, I will Malou, I will.”

Olga had been coming and going from the hotel, usually claiming to be doing war work for Ruby.

Charlie suspected it was just a handy way of avoiding questions. She’d just come in from the street and gone straight to the front desk.

"She'll be asking for her messages, there have been quite a few recently." Said Malou. "Do we invite her to join us?"

"I think we should, I want her to help me with the Arturo business."

It took a little waving at the receptionist and pointing, but eventually Olga was sat drinking coffee and making appreciative noises about the biscuits.

"I needed to talk to you Charlotte." Said Olga. "It isn't good, Igor heard from one of the cartel people that you'd accepted the deal to take care of the Arturo problem. It's not a secret now and Arturo is bound to know."

"Gregor must have leaked the information, hoping I'd draw the battle away from him and his people in Milan." Said Charlie.

"He's a bastard, you can't trust him." Said Olga.

"Stay in the hotel as much as possible." Said Malou. "I know people who will tell me about any arrivals at the airport we should be worried about. There are a few retired DGSE operative too, who I can use to toughen up security."

Ruby had learned from her Jurgis and Charlie had Pablo, Jai and Christophe. She listened to their conversations, picking up their knowledge like a sponge. They were training her with every story, every anecdote.

"London..... We've all got people in London." She said. "I'll send a text to Trudy and Lau right away. Just telling them to be extra careful of strangers. They'll get the idea."

It actually took her a while to compose the text. It had to be a little vague, all communications had the potential to fall into the wrong hands. On the other hand, it had to convey a sense of urgency. When she was happy, Charlie pressed send and then sent it to Eugenie too, just to be extra sure.

"Done..... Now Olga." She said. "I'm hoping you'll join me in Mexico."

"So you know where Arturo is hiding?" Asked Olga.

"Yes, he's north east of Culiacán, in an estate he likes to call La Fortaleza, The Fortress. Gregor gave me three possible locations, but after talking to his generals, I'm certain Arturo is living in his fortress."

"His generals?" Asked Olga.

"His chief advisers, all three of them were there." Said Charlotte. "Long story, they were there to test if I was the genuine article. I failed the test. But I looked into their minds and all three are certain Arturo is in the estate near Culiacán."

"Anywhere called The Fortress Charlie....." Said Malou. "You can guarantee it'll be a tough place to attack, very tough."

"It'll be like going into North Korea again." Said Olga. "Most of the thirteen will want to go, and Kallina of course. I can find another dozen well trained men to add to Pablo and his people. It'll be tough even then, but we can win."

"I suspect Charlie will want to enter The Fortress on her own." Said Malou.

"She's not that crazy." Said Olga.

Only she was that crazy and taking on Arturo and his men on her own, had been her idea right from the beginning. Her destruction of Arturo had to be something huge, something legendary, something never forgotten.

"I will need your to help me get close to the target." Said Charlie. "Malou is right though, I want to enter his estate on my own. I have to be on my own....The last thing I need to worry about is hurting allies once I get to work. I'll take Pablo, Jai and Christophe. I'm sure you've got a few men to bring along."

"I can bring Igor and Aron." Said Olga. "No Kallina though, no Ruby.....Really?"

"Yes really, I need to do this on my own."

"Fine, but you can call Ruby and tell her."

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Lily hadn't expected to get a place on the course that quickly. There was a quota she was told and few women her age were signing up for the full tough guy course.

"I didn't want the full course, just the firearms training." She'd told the lady in HR. "Just enough to get signed off as competent....Actually barely competent will do."

"Ohh, that presents us with a problem Lily. Places on just the firearms course are popular, there's currently an eighteen month waiting list. If you're willing to do the entire course, I can get you on it.....Are you free on Monday?"

Lily was currently wearing a borrowed karate suit, a Karate gi as the instructor had called it. Well laundered and it fitted reasonably well. The thought that hundreds of sweaty young men had worn it, was a little disconcerting. She wasn't the only female on the course, there was one other. Two women and about twelve men. They'd already done the warm up exercises, lots of stretching, pulling and running about, that had left her hot and sweating. Lily had always considered herself to be fit, though she now realised that had been a delusion.

"Line up along the side of the tatami." Yelled the instructor.

Tatami was Japanese for mat. It seemed that being a tough guy involved learning quite a lot of Japanese words. The lady in HR had failed to mention that. Hot, sweating and looking a little tired, they all lined up for the next piece of torture.

"Just a little test to see how much you already know. Stop the attacker if you can.... Hajime."

Another Japanese word, she was willing to bet a month's pay on it meaning 'begin.' The man playing the attacker was huge, a good six feet nine and weighing well over two hundred and fifty pounds. He stood in front of the first trainee, who looked suitably nervous. After a count of five the attacker moved forward and it was all over in about three seconds. The trainee was on their back on the mat.... Sorry tatami. They were coughing and pulling a face that signified pain and discomfort.

"Move to the next..... Hajime."

Lily had never really been a team player, not even at school. To her there was no sense in bouncing the ball in a game of basketball, when it was easier to pick up the ball and run with it. After the second trainee ended up writhing on the ground, she decided it wasn't a test, it was a cruel and unusual punishment.

"Could you clarify the aims of this test please?" She shouted.

"To stop the attacker." Replied the instructor.

"By any means?"

"Yes, by any means."

The trainee next to her made a valiant attempt, waving his arms about and shouting some sort of battle cry. Three seconds later he was on his back, rubbing his back and looking to be in pain. Not that anyone seemed that bothered.

"Move to the next..... Hajime."

It was her turn and Lily had no intention of playing fair or sticking to the rules. For a start no one had told them the rules, and what had happened to the trainee next to her, was anything but fair. She clenched her right fist and gave it a count of two.

He grunted, the attacker actually grunted as her knuckles found his throat. Her blow landed right on his Adam's apple to be precise. He looked confused while he choked, very few trainees probably did much in the way of ignoring the rules, or fighting back.

"Sorry." She muttered.

While he choked and made gurgling sounds, she gave him a very hard kick between his legs. He might have been wearing a box, but she was betting on him not bothering for a one sided fight with a bunch of trainees. She'd been right, he was on the floor, choking as he reached for his balls.

"Will that do?" She asked the startled looking instructor.

"Yes.....Erm."

He had to look her name up on the list.

"Yes Lily, a good display of initiative."

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"Stop getting in the bags, or you might end up in the Yemen for a while." Said Kallina.

Her cat needed pulling out of the holdalls for about the tenth time that morning. Constanze was just being curious of course, it was what cats did. After a little purring, her elderly cat found a chair to curl up on.

"Good, stay there....I need to concentrate."

They'd given her lists of what they needed, quite extensive lists. Having a woman in the prison definitely slanted the lists towards health and hygiene, even a request for condoms.

"Who is using what on whom, is none of our concern Constanze." She muttered.

She knew her cat didn't reply to her, she hadn't gone completely over the edge. It was just that living alone so much of the time, a pretend conversation gave her an opportunity to look at situations from more than one angle.

"I just hope the silly girl realises how dangerous Max can be....What? Yes Constanze, I'm sure Monique is more than capable of looking after herself."

Kallina had bought most of the supplies, but not all. Given the urgent need, she'd visited a few stores in the early hours, filling carts and bringing them back to her house in Georgia. All the food was tinned or dried. Nothing that couldn't be eaten cold, even if it tasted like crap.

"Max won't be happy, there's a lot of beans....Yes, he should be grateful for what he's given."

There had been a request for a camping stove, but Kallina had crossed it through. Gas cylinders were too easy to turn into demolition devices. The stove had been on Lionel's list in Max's writing.

"Yes.....It is nice that age hasn't addled his wits. Not like me Constanze, not like me."

She'd piled everything on her lounge floor and ticked everything off the lists. Just about everything was now inside a large number of holdalls. Big holdalls, the sort of thing favoured by people with large items of sports equipment. It would mean several trips to deliver it all, even for someone with her strength. Kallina was well aware that her memory could be erratic. She was looking through the bags, ticking everything off again, before zipping them up.

"You're right Constanze, I did forget the box of batteries for his radio."

They were on the kitchen table, which meant a quick look through every other room in the house. Eventually she picked up four of the huge bags and looked at her sleeping cat.

"Are you coming? It might be the last chance for a while. What? Don't worry.....If anything happens to me, Charlotte knows where they are, Ruby too.... Probably."

Her cat closed her eyes and ignored the invitation. Kallina had no idea what time it was in the Yemen, but there was still daylight coming through the gaps in the walls. She'd taken the bags to the

stores and Max was lying naked on his bed. He wasn't alone. Dropping a bag full of tins woke them both up.

"Oh.....I....We weren't expecting you." Said Monique.

At least Monique had the decency to cover herself in a sheet. Max just lay there naked, as though the entire world wanted to see his shrivelled plums.

"I bet you didn't bring a stove." Said Max.

"Of course I didn't..... You didn't get the set of kitchen knives either."

"What did we get ?" Asked Monique.

"Everything apart from the few things Max knows he can't have. You can begin unpacking while I carry on bringing it all here."

By the time she returned Max was gone, leaving Monique to begin stacking boxes of tins against the wall.

"I know Max moans, but I quite like tinned burgers and beans."

"Hoorah, a rare thing here.....A happy customer."

It was no business of hers of course, they could hack each other to bits if they wanted. After all, fewer mouths to feed meant less tins to bag up and carry. It was just that Charlotte obviously wanted to keep the Ostbys alive and well.

"Look, it's none of my business, but have you thought it through ? This thing with Max I mean."

"Lionel doesn't mind, I still love him, he knows that. I sleep with him every night."

"Christ..... You're having sex with both of them ?"

"I told you....Lionel doesn't mind." Yelled Monique.

She obviously realised her voice had been too loud. Monique looked around, as though watching for Lionel or Max walking into the stores.

"And as for Max, I don't think he cares." Whispered Monique

If Constanze had been there, she'd have told her it was none of her business. Kallina sat on a box of bottled water, determined to warn Monique about the danger she might be creating.

"Are you trying to use sex to control Max ?" She asked. "It won't work, you don't understand men like Max. No one does, he's a one off, a throwback. You'll now be a sex object to him and fairly soon he'll consider you his property. If Lionel tries to object, Max will kill him. No rows, no squabbles, no hint of what's about to happen. Max will break his neck or batter him to death with the stick he uses to kill snakes."

"I'll be careful.....I will warn Lionel not to get jealous."

"Good luck with that.....Look Monique it's your life, your choices. Max is a one off though, I never imagined you'd actually have sex with him. He is quite capable of killing Lionel, cutting his body up with a sharpened edge of a can, before pushing the whole bloody mess down the hole. And he could get it all done before breakfast."

"I can't stop sleeping with him, that's bound to make him angry."

"Yes, it probably will." Said Kallina.

"So what do I do ?"

"Divorce Lionel and do it noisily in front of Max. Tell Lionel that you no longer consider him your husband. Tell him you're now with Max and want nothing further to do with him, sexually."

"I don't think I could do that."

"Then you've got a problem. I'll get some more bags, there's still a lot more to come."

"You brought us so much food and water."

"I'm not sure when you'll see me again. Charlotte will look in from time to time though. She'll make sure you don't starve."

"Or you could take Lionel and me to a street anywhere in Paris and let us go. That would be a lot easier for all of us."

Kallina just shook her head and went back to Georgia for more bags. By the time she left them the final three holdalls, all three of them were in the store room, eagerly stacking food against the wall. Even Max wasn't making rude comments about beans or tins of Spam. They looked for all the world like a happy little family. A happy, strange and very dysfunctional little family.

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Olga didn't really have a family, apart from Ruby and the thirteen. Everyone she cared about was tough as nails and well protected, or so she thought. There were a few surviving aunts somewhere in Russia, though even she'd have trouble finding them. She was lying on her bed in Malou's hotel when the text arrived with a picture attached.

'Call us if you want her back in one piece.'

It was a picture of Luca, the final year medical student in Budapest. Poor Luca who hadn't approved of Olga's business or associates. There was blood on the girl's cheek and her mouth was wide open. Even though the pictures was silent, Olga could almost hear Luca screaming. They'd hurt her, the bastards had hurt Luca.

"Fuck." Said Olga.

It was Arturo's people of course, there was no one else currently wanting to abduct her friends. No one that she could think of, though she was aware there might be someone else she'd seriously pissed off. She dialled reception and asked them to find Malou and tell her to come to her room.

"Please tell her it's urgent."

The second text arrived while she was waiting. Olga understood the technique, she'd used it herself.

'We're waiting for that call.'

Pile on the pressure, create a climate of fear and anxiety. There would need to be a call to the kidnappers, they needed to be sure Luca was of value to them, someone worth keeping alive. Olga planned to make them wait though. Malou arrived with a worried look on her face and a cellphone in her hand.

"Whenever Ruby said it was urgent, it usually meant some tidying up to be done." She said.

Olga showed her the text and picture.

"That's Luca, a medical student who patches up my guys." Said Olga. "Aron can only walk because of what she did for him."

"Does this girl mean something to you?" Asked Malou.

"If you'd asked me yesterday I'd have said no. Now though, seeing that picture....I hate the idea of her being hurt."

"So she does mean something to you. You'll need to call them soon, I'm sure we've both been through this sort of thing before, sometimes as the ones doing the abducting." Said Malou.

"I know, I'll call them within an hour."

"I'll get their phone traced, though it's probably a cheap throw away phone." Said Malou. "If you give me Luca's name and address, I can begin a few discreet enquiries. Plus you must have your own contacts in Budapest."

Once she had the details Malou left, with a promise to return once she had some information worth sharing. The next text arrived within a few minutes of Malou leaving.

'This one is a screamer. Call us.'

Olga called Igor first, to get the ball rolling in her organisation and check on the obvious.

“First thing is to make sure she isn’t happily sat at home.” She told him.

Luca wouldn’t be at home of course, but it had to be checked, the way the police always searched the house for reported runaways. The next call was going to be harder, Charlotte didn’t need any more worries and stress. She had to know though, as it was almost certain to be Arturo behind the abduction. Olga pressed the Charlie icon on her phone. It seemed to take an age for her call to be answered.

“Hi Olga, I was just about to call you.”

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Ruby was trying not to get angry. She was tolerant about most things, though being called a liar could still press her buttons. It had been a rainy morning in Kenya and everyone seemed to be feeling tired, wet and irritable. Getting her own people to follow her across miles of wet grasslands was one thing, but Ishel’s rogues didn’t know her.

“I’m not calling you a liar.” Said Ishel. “It’s just that no one else heard anything. We just saw the distorted image of two creatures waving at us. You might have heard the wind or something.”

“How often do I have to say it ? It wasn’t a sound, we talked mentally. I told the female creature my name, though she already seemed to know about me. There was an invitation of sorts, though it came with a warning. Their sacred stone is now deep underground and getting to it will be dangerous. It is the only way to pass through what they call the shroud.”

Sophie looked miserable, but she was nodding at her. Spider and Sarah were drenched, yet Ruby was still picking up faith and trust. Ishel and her rogues had no faith in her though. Crap.....it was hardly surprising, they’d only just met her.

“I’m not trying to be awkward.....But where are you taking us ?” Asked Ishel.

“That’s a fair question.” Added Doc. “We’re all wet, tired and hungry.”

Sarah didn’t call out, she moved close to her, talking in almost a whisper.

“Let everyone stop for food and a rest Ruby. They’ll all be much happier then.”

They’d walked for miles, the vehicles were still near the Great Rift tourist areas. Most carried backpacks though, probably filled with water and things they could nibble at while on the move. She should have checked that, she wouldn’t normally have dragged them miles with no food. It had been the call from Charlotte though....It had drained her.

“We’ll stop for a rest, please share whatever supplies you have.” She shouted. “Before we move on, I’ll explain where we’re going and why.”

Sarah tried to follow her as she walked away from the others, though a simple mental fog gave her privacy. If she was going to cry, she wanted to do it alone. Ruby realised the thirteen would all break from her eventually, all children eventually leave their mothers. Some would marry humans and give up using their gifts, and that too was understandable, though their children would need monitoring.

“It’s not that I don’t love you, we’ll still be close.” Charlotte had told her. “I even want to do more work for George. I want to do it as me though, as a person, not just someone standing in when you’re busy.”

Why did Charlotte have to be the first to make the break ? Ruby had expected it to be Lau, after a huge argument about ethics, morality and the use of violence. Lau had changed though and of all people, Charlie seemed to be drifting away from her.

“I’ll still be there....Call me and I’ll always help you Ruby....Always.” Charlie had told her.

Ruby felt alone and it was a strange feeling. Losing Serge had knocked her down and now losing Charlie. The arrival of Sarah probably saved her from disappearing into despair.

"You can't hide..... I won't let you." Said Sarah.

"How did you find me?"

"Sophie turned off your, whatever it is you do. She's worried, we're all worried. Was it Charlotte who upset you? Wait until I see her."

Ruby sighed and sat on a fallen tree, Sarah sitting next to her.

"It's not Charlie, not really." She said. "It's me trying to do my mother hen routine for far too long. Kurt told me to look after them before he died. Kallina gave me her most precious possessions, the thirteen wonderful, strange children. Then Serge was killed by that stupid teacher. Instead of letting the thirteen learn and move on, I've smothered them....Or ignored them completely....I fucked up Sarah."

Ruby cried and let the tears cover her face. Sarah knew her well enough to resist giving her lots of useless advice about being positive.

"So you're letting her join the cartel?" Asked Sarah.

The question caught her by surprise.

"I hadn't thought of it like that Sarah, though she will need some sort of organisation to protect her. She wants to go after Arturo on her own to earn a little seed money, as she called it. After that.....Yes, I suppose she will be working for the Cartel, and maybe Olga too."

"She'd better not ask me for help." Said Sarah.

Ruby laughed and the tears stopped, as if by magic.

"Dear Sarah, you know you won't say no." Said Ruby. "Like me you'll rush to help her, as will Spider. Charlotte may be setting up on her own, but she'll still be family. Come on, I need to try and persuade Ishel I'm not schizophrenic and hearing voices."

"Do you want me to shoot her?"

Ruby kissed Sarah, a proper kiss on the lips. Partly it had been to show friendship, but partly it had been to see the look of surprise on Sarah's face.

"Maybe later Sarah, keep the gun handy."

Some lobbying had been going on in her absence, Doc was stood with the rogues, while Anna sat on a tree stump in the gap between the factions. She picked up the idea of a vote being taken from Anna's mind.

"Oh crap, Ishel has been agitating for a vote to replace me as leader." Said Ruby. "I'll try to remember the words to my 'this isn't a democracy' speech that worked so well on you and Spider."

"The thirteen will never follow her. We might be fighting the rogue's after all." Said Sarah.

"I think Ishel is banking on me relinquishing command to avoid a war between the two sides."

"Will you let her become the leader?" Asked Sarah.

"To be honest, I'm not sure. Keep your gun ready, we'll have to see how this one plays out."

Ishel hadn't been idle and having Doc on her side was a plus. Even some of Ruby's people were wondering if she was unwell and needed a break. All for the best of reasons of course, but they were thinking about giving Ishel the power she craved. Nearly every mind she looked at, held doubts about her competence to lead. Apart from Sophie of course, dear loyal, wonderful Sophie.

"So, you've returned." Said Ishel. "We've been talking about an idea to give you a well-earned rest....."

Ruby was ready to turn Ishel and her rogues to ash, rather than relinquish her leadership. Every single one of them would die, even if it did amount to genocide. Ishel had misread politeness as weakness and that mistake was likely to be her last. Ruby began to pick Rogue's to aim her gifts at,

right down to which body parts to burn or crush first. The approaching helicopter changed everything, just by appearing in the rain filled sky.

"Who are they? It's got no markings." Someone said.

"It's the same type the Kenyan police use." Said Doc. "It's a Eurocopter AS350, I think."

Two of them, the second helicopter arriving meant the agenda changed completely. There was no more talk of changing the leader, not now.

"One of them seems to know us, he's thinking about Trudy." Said Sophie.

"They seem to be friends, don't attack them." Shouted Ruby.

Everyone looked towards her, obeying her instructions. Any idea of picking a new leader seemed forgotten, at least for now.

"I'm getting a name.....Rory." Said Sophie.

"It's Foxy's people.....They're definitely friends." Said Ruby.

Three men got out of the helicopters, all carrying huge amounts of baggage. Once the three men had collected their things, the helicopters took off and headed south. Whoever they were? Why they'd been sent? It looked like they meant to stay for a while. The older man of the three approached her, hand outstretched.

"Ruby, I've been sent from London to support you in any way I can. Foxy sent me, you can call me Rory." He said.

It was such a ludicrous Stanley meets Livingstone moment, that she nearly laughed.

"Thank you, Trudy did mention we might be getting some reinforcements." She said.

Rory politely introduced Graham and Todd. She shook hands with them both, though the explosions in her head were definitely caused by Todd. He was screaming, a constant internal scream in his mind that never stopped.

"Keep still." She told him.

No asking for permission, no explanations. Ruby held his head in her hands, amazed that Todd had all that constant mental pain, yet appeared to function normally.

"So much pain." She said.

"I'm used to it." Said Todd.

Perhaps he needed his pain, she'd heard of people who almost cherished such things. To her it was impossible not to help. Not a cure, that was beyond even her gifts. She found the memories causing the pain and pushed them deep into his mind. Not quite deep enough to be gone forever, but the screaming in his mind would be diminished to a whimper.

"That..... Should be better, much better..... Is it? Better?" She asked.

"Yes, it is.....How did you?"

"Leave Ruby alone Todd." Said Rory. "Thank the lady and pick up your kit."

"Thank you." Said Todd.

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Paris to Budapest is a long journey, no matter what method of travel you use. Fifteen hundred kilometres if you drive across Europe on the A4. The European Union had expanded a long way to the East, and Charlotte needed to cross most of it. The journey would take twenty two hours by train. Even by air it was a flight of just over five hours. Malou's staff at the hotel had booked the airline tickets for Olga, Charlie and the three men travelling with them. Normally Charlotte would have contacted George or Penny about such things, but Malou's people were just as efficient. The hotel looked up travel enquiries from guests all day, many turning into bookings. Hers would be lost in amongst them, like hiding a tree in a forest.

They were currently stood in the drizzle outside Budapest Ferenc Liszt International Airport, with Olga yelling at someone on her phone, in loud Hungarian.

"The vehicle will be here in ten minutes." Said Olga. "I told the fools they had to be on time."

"I just hope they remembered the weapons." Said Pablo.

As Malou had expected the phone number used by Luca's kidnappers was a throw away, a burner phone. Olga had called the number twice, before it went dead. A text had arrived from another burner phone and the cycle had carried on for another five or six phones. Their adversaries were obviously experienced in abduction and knew what they were doing.

"Where are we supposed to be?" Asked Jai. "I lost track after they wanted us to fly to Brussels."

"They should think we're in Amsterdam, waiting for their next call." Said Olga. "I bet they don't though, they'll have tracked my phone right across Europe and know we're here, in Budapest."

"They might kill the girl because we ignored their instructions." Said Christophe.

"Instructions!" Snapped Olga. "They've been trying to bounce us about.....Anything to stop, or delay us going to Mexico. They talk about a ransom for Luca, but never give me figure. If they kill her.....Arturo will die slowly."

Charlotte quite enjoyed the rain sometimes, especially if she was dressed for it. The cool water on her forehead pulled her into a warm kind of melancholy. It was the lazy kind of rain though, the sort that seems to want to go through your clothes, rather than round them. She was damp, uncomfortable, and just wanted to resolve the business with Luca, one way or another.

"They probably won't have killed her, not yet." Said Charlie. "At the moment she still might be of use to them, even if only as a bloody picture to wind you up."

"You really think she's still alive?" Asked Olga.

No lying to Olga, it was pointless. Things were, as there were. Charlie looked up into the dark night sky, that seemed intent on drenching them to the bone.

"I give it about a fifty-fifty chance that we'll find her alive." She said.

"Can't you tell? Can't you feel her, like outside the Ostby's house?" Asked Pablo.

"That was a house in the middle of nowhere." Said Charlie. "And I'd already seen the Ostbys at a night club. Budapest is a city of nearly two million, which is a lot of background noise. And of course, I've never actually met Luca."

"Sorry, it was just an idea." Said Pablo.

"This is my adopted home, my city." Said Olga. "If Luca has been injured I know a hospital that will look after her and not make a lot of fuss about form filling and identification....Just so long as she's alive."

Three cars arrived after about fifteen minutes. Two were for them, both brand new SUVs that looked as though they'd come out of the showroom that morning. Supplied by the cartel and hopefully containing Pablo's preferred choice of weapons. All another debt owed to the cartel, another favour from Gregor. It was all drawing her in, but she did need an organisation behind her. It was unlikely Foxy would continue to offer the kind of support and protection he provided for Ruby.

"You're late, fucking fifteen minutes late." Olga yelled at the driver of the lead SUV.

"It's fucking Football." He replied. "MTK Budapest are playing at home.....Traffic is screwed up all over the city. We got everything you asked for."

The drivers got into the third vehicle, just about the oldest Fiat car that Charlotte had ever seen.

They were driven away, probably into another traffic snarl up. Charlie went in the first SUV with Olga and Pablo, leaving Jai and Christophe to follow them in the second vehicle. The floor of their SUV looked like the front page of a guns and ammo catalogue.

“Looks to be everything, but I should check it over.” Said Pablo.

“It’s at least a two hour drive to the village of Tóalmás.” Said Olga. “You’ve got plenty of time to check everything over.”

Olga drove; she knew the roads east out of Budapest like the back of her hand, as she’d told them several times.

“It makes sense that they’d be somewhere quiet like Tóalmás.” Said Olga. “They wouldn’t want to take Luca too far, especially if she was bloody from being abducted. I never did believe they’d taken her to Brussels. We’ll find subcontractors, you wait and see. Low life ex-military mercenaries, hired by Arturo’s people.”

The burner phones had provided no leads. In the end the location where Luca was being kept had been found by those old favourites, greed and fear, the carrot and the stick. Actually sloppiness too, Arturo’s people had done everything in too much of a hurry, probably assuming a rescue party would spend days scouring Brussels or Amsterdam.

“Everything looks perfect.” Said Pablo. “They’ve even provided medical supplies in case Luca is injured.”

“Or for her to use on us, if things go wrong.” Said Charlie. “They’ll know we’re on the way....It’s as good as walking into a trap.”

“You do your whammy thing and we’ll be alright.” Said Olga. “I don’t suppose you could teach me how to do that stuff ?”

“No, you have to be born with it.”

Olga had put the frighteners on a few people, but Malou’s contacts had found the man who eventually talked. An Armenian who owned six restaurants and lived quietly in a village not far from Paris. As a side line he provided hired muscle and safe houses to organisations who needed them. Any organisation, he wasn’t fussy, as long as they paid in cash. The Armenian had been killed, but only after he’d given the location of the six men and the injured woman they’d had with them. Greed had killed the man, he’d insisted on trying to renegotiate the price for his information.

“I got this for you.” Said Pablo.

It was a Glock 32, the same model Ruby had carried everywhere in North Korea. It came with a neat leather holster to fix under her jacket.

“I mean.....You probably won’t need it, but just in case.” Said Pablo.

“Thank you, it might come in useful.”

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