

Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

Chapter 4 - Budapest

“Sophie loved the rocket launcher; it was love at first sight. Her first love had been a Russian made bazooka Ruby had bought from an arms dealer in Vladivostok. That had been two inches taller than her and probably heavier than her. An old weapon, it seemed they weren’t made anymore.”

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The evening before they flew to Budapest and after a dinner with everyone in Malou’s rooms. Ruby had taken a bottle of beer, or two, up to the roof. Hungary had joined the EU in two thousand and four, yet there was still something about the country, a certain feeling. To Ruby going to Budapest felt like stepping over a line from the ordinary everyday world and onto the road less travelled. So often, the city had been the catalyst to get her started on the right path.

“Can I join you ?” Asked Lily. “I brought my own beer.”

“No problem, though there is a cool breeze up here tonight.”

Lily had reported to her already, about her interview at the British embassy. Ruby had been allowed into the building, but the interview with the security services liaison had been private. Only Lily had known what had been said and Ruby suspected she hadn’t been told everything. Not that she’d look into Lily’s mind. The young woman was one of them, part of their weird and dysfunctional family.

“I’m glad Foxy gave you an official period of leave.” Said Ruby. “I wasn’t looking forward to breaking you out of captivity for a second time.”

“Me too, though.....There’s something I was asked not to tell you.” Said Lily.

Here it came and judging by how tense Lily was, it had to be something huge.

“Out with it Lily.....Did they ask you to keep an eye on me ?”

“Yes, I’m supposed to report in by phone every two days. I didn’t want to agree, but they threatened to keep me in the embassy if I didn’t agree. There were hints about bothering my mum too.”

“Do you think Foxy was behind it ?” Asked Ruby.

“I’m sure he’d love to know what you’re doing, but threats aren’t his style. My guess would be the people Foxy calls the arseholes in Vauxhall. The people in their hotel with the gold-plated taps in the bathrooms.”

“Yes, MI6 makes sense.” Said Ruby. “I propose that you report as ordered. You and I will decide what not to tell them and we might add a few pieces of fake information. Just to set them on the wrong path. Does that sound alright to you ?”

“Yes, it does. Thanks for not making me walk the plank, or whatever.”

“No walking the plank.” Said Ruby. “Our top punishment now is applying lotion to Charlotte’s burns, after she’s been using her gifts.”

“Oh yes, that was pretty memorable.” Said Lily. “I’d heard about it; I’d even seen the satellite images from China. Seeing her do it though, being right there.....”

“We’re on a plane most of tomorrow, or waiting in airport lounges.” Said Ruby. “I’ve found having a slight hangover can improve air travel no end. Do you fancy something stronger than beer ?”

“Oh, yes please.....And lots of it.”

Ruby put her hand under her chair and produced a full bottle of tequila. After removing the top, she took several mouthfuls of the fiery yellow liquid. Not her usual tippie, but Serge had been fond of tequila. No glasses, she hadn't prepared for having company. She handed the bottle to Lily.

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Sarah had tried a lot of forms of transport and apart from a tour of Venice's canals by gondola, air travel was her favourite way to get around. Trains could be alright too, provided there was a decent buffet car. Her main rule though, was that just about anything was better than bobbing about in small boats.

"That's what I like about Ruby." She said. "No cheapo jets with no decent food and drink, which land miles away from where you're going."

"I have to agree, this is definitely the way to travel." Said Spider.

Sarah had no idea what class Ruby had booked them under. As they weren't up the front, it was probably business class. Nice large comfy seats and lots of free drinks. The two-and-a-half-hour flight was going to feel much too short.

"I could spend my entire life on a flight like this." She said.

Sarah remembered seeing an Air France logo somewhere, though the airline didn't matter. Once you were inside a large modern civilian airliner, they all looked pretty much the same. Only the service varied and so far at least, the service had been superb. Usually, Ruby split people up on different flights on different days. Travelling as a group was wonderful.

The main people to worry about seemed to be Gallaan Industries and large as they might, they couldn't arrange for a group of armed police officers to be waiting in the airport at the other end. Only nations had that kind of power and so far at least, they hadn't pissed off any nations. That might change of course, it usually did.

"How did Lily get sat next to Ruby? She's only been with us for five minutes." She said.

"If you want to ask Lily to swap seats for a while, go ahead." Said Spider. "I have no problem sitting with Lily for as long as you like."

"Oi, behave yourself."

She gave him a playful thump on the arm. Once she'd have been genuinely jealous. Now though, their relationship was solid enough to survive Spider fancying a pretty girl half his age. Actually, when she thought about....Yes, there was still a bit of jealousy. Maybe that was normal and healthy.

"I won't be long." She said. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

"No, Lily did the MI6 tough guy course. We can talk guns and choke holds for half an hour."

Lily didn't seem upset when Sarah asked her to swap seats, which Sarah chose to take as a good sign. So, another woman knew more about guns than her....Big deal.

"Please....Don't tell me you and Spider are having problems." Said Ruby. "We need one trip abroad without you two fighting."

"We're fine."

"So, why swap seats to get me all to yourself?" Asked Ruby.

"The truth is, I hadn't intended to." She said. "Then Spider sort of....I think he might have tricked me into it."

Ruby laughed, so she laughed. It was impossible not to.

"After all this business is over, are you up for a hiking holiday?" Asked Ruby. "A proper holiday with no one following us, or any agenda other than having a good time. I was thinking of Peru and starting off from Cusco. We could take a slow hike to Machu Pichu, it's only seventy five kilometres. Are you up for it?"

“How do we get to Cusco ?”

“By air of course, first class all the way.”

“Good, I’ll definitely go. Spider too, we’ll both go with you.”

“So, answering for him now ?” Asked Ruby.

“I have been for a while; he just hasn’t noticed yet.”

More laughter and Ruby waved to a stewardess who’d looked after them earlier. The woman was a little older than Ruby. A few smiles from Ruby and a few whispers. The stewardess actually blushed a little, though she didn’t move away.

“What did you do ?” Asked Sarah, after the woman had gone.

“You’ll see.”

The stewardess returned with a cold bottle of champagne and two glasses. There was also a promise of two dinners later, from the first-class section. Sarah could have afforded first class; Ruby could have probably hired her own plane. There was just something about food obtained by a scam though. It always tasted so damn good.

“What if you get it wrong, Ruby ?” She asked. “You must have tried that with a woman who isn’t into other women.”

“I’ve never got it wrong.....I don’t think it works like that.”

“So..... You’re just a huge tease.”

“Now I am, there’s Todd in my life. Once I’d have given her my telephone number for the next time, she’s in London.”

“Ruby Mason.....You’re a wild thing.”

“Wait until we’re in Peru, Sarah.....I’ll reintroduce you to your wild side.”

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Olga had been known by at least half a dozen surnames over the years, though she now liked to be known as just Olga. Once over six feet tall, she seemed to have shrunk over the years. Her doctor told her everyone shrinks a little as they get older. At thirty five her hair was still naturally blonde and she was still just on six feet tall. Russian by birth, though she’d considered Budapest to be her home since her early twenties. Like Ruby, she’d once worked for Jurgis, the now dead East European mobster. Her relationship with Ruby was a mixed bag, they’d tried to kill each other once. Not that Olga ever allowed grudges to get in the way of business.

“Shouldn’t they be here by now ?” Asked Luca.

“I sent Jakub to the airport.” Said Olga. “He knows what he’s doing. The traffic.....It’ll be the traffic, it’s always bad.”

Luca Lengyel was now a qualified doctor, at least on paper. She’d passed all of her exams, but the Hungarian medical system required her to gain relevant experience before she could open up an office as Dr Lengyel. Not that Olga understood it all, she didn’t need to. Olga was good at learning something very well, but only the details she had to know. Becoming a twenty-four-hour expert, she called it. Bottom line was Luca working for her on the side for a while longer, before setting herself up as a fully qualified, no fucking about, doctor.

Why did Olga require a doctor on her payroll ? Olga didn’t like the term mobster. There were times though, when differences with business rivals, were settled by bullets. Luca had patched up a few of Ruby’s people once and they had rescued her from a drug cartel. All very emotional stuff and Olga could foresee a lot of cuddling and maybe even a little weeping, when Ruby and her wunderkinds arrived.

“They’re really late.” Said Luca.

“Ruby is tough, not the sort to get mugged at the airport.”

A visit from Ruby could lead to some good things happening and some bad. Olga had lost some of her best people the last time, but she'd also made a lot of money. So much money that she'd moved to a new home. A mansion in the southern suburbs of Budapest, that had enough rooms for Ruby and everyone travelling with her. It had been owned by a local politician until his body had turned up in the river Danube one morning. Nothing to do with her, but her legit real estate company had picked up the place at about half its true worth. It seemed owners dying under mysterious circumstances really screwed with property prices. Olga's phone buzzed at her.

“Jakub says they're two minutes away Luca..... Stop panicking.”

Olga had done well recently, despite a few blips in the economy. There was still money to be made by those willing to trade in just about anything, especially if it was illicit. Her organisation happily obtained anything for anyone with the cash to buy it. Then there was her legit transport company and the thriving real estate empire. She'd done so well that there were now people to open the door when the bell rang. Ruby was expected of course, as were those travelling with her.

“Wow, this is better than your place in District Sixteen.” Said Ruby.

“I love this house, though sometimes.....I do miss having a lower profile.” Said Olga. “I seemed to get a lot more interest from the tax people after I bought this place.”

There was a lot of hugging and a few emotional moments. Luca actually cried a little when Charlotte hugged her. There was a lot of history between Olga's people and Ruby's wunderkinds. Especially as they knew they weren't totally human. Olga had seen them do some weird and wonderful things. Scary thing too, especially from Charlotte.

“Sophie, I do believe you've grown.” Said Olga.

“Yeah, right.”

Sophie had grown all she was ever going to grow. It was one of their standard greetings and there were hugs. Olga had heard of Lily, but Caleb was completely new. Of course, there were introductions and details of events in Belgium, all given while refreshments were served.

“And Roger.....I haven't seen you since.....”

“So long.....I wish it hadn't been so long, Olga.”

Olga had intended to let her house staff show her guests to their rooms, but ended up doing it herself. There was no hiding anything with Ruby and her group, no pretending to be something she wasn't. Caleb might be a bit of an unknown, but the rest of them.....They knew each other very well, warts and all.

Olga had obtained presents for everyone; ones she was sure they'd appreciate. She was still waiting for the squeal of delight when Sophie found the rocket launcher at the back of a tall cupboard.

Spider and Sarah had been given a nice room with a view of the gardens at the rear of the mansion.

“Every room has ensuite facilities.” She said. “I've given everyone a little welcome gift. Yours Spider, is in the top drawer of the dressing table.”

Olga liked the Browning 9mm as a weapon. It worked well and had a few points above the Glock equivalent, at least to her it did. Spider had a thing about the gun, she saw his face light up as he lifted it out of the drawer. The British Army might have gone over to Glocks, but not Spider. It seemed you never really did forget your first love.

“There's a forty-five automatic for Sarah, in the next drawer down.” Said Olga. “Far too heavy for her, of course, with a wicked recoil.”

“Just the way I like them.” Said Sarah.

Ruby had been given her room first, so Olga went back to see her after everyone else had been settled. Ruby was on her own as she hung up her clothes in the wardrobe.

“Sophie loves her present, Olga. I felt her mind go pow, when she found it.”

“Good, you’d never believe the trouble I had finding one, or maybe you would. Can we talk ? It’s about Luca and it needs to be decided before she gets too obsessed with the idea.”

Ruby sat on the bed, in a sort of fine, lets get to it pose. Olga leant against the door, to ensure a few minutes privacy.

“When Charlie was last here, she did a mind meld thing with Luca to give her courage. It seems to have been a permanent fix.” Said Olga.

“That sound like Charlie. Do you want me to undo it ?”

“No, not at all. Luca no longer moans about what she used to call, my seedy business. It’s just that she wants to go with you to wherever you’re going. She thinks you’ll need a decent doctor with you.”

“She might be right, finding local medical care can often be a problem. So Olga, do you want me say yes to her going, or no ?”

Did she want Luca to risk life and limb in Mogadishu, before heading off to who knew where ? Olga had already decided that a frustrated Luca who really wanted to be elsewhere, would be a nightmare.

“She can be irritating, Ruby. Take her, but promise me you won’t ditch her. No giving her the money for an air ticket, before leaving at the airstrip of a one-horse town in the middle of nowhere. Promise me, Ruby.”

“I’m used to irritating.” Said Ruby. “You should hear Anna when it’s her night to cook for a dozen hungry people. I’ll take Luca and.....You have my word, no ditching her. I’ll do my best to bring her back to Budapest in one piece. Then she can settle down and become a GP, or whatever they’re called here.”

“Általános orvos is the literal translation. Brilliant I’ll tell Luca to pack a bag. I’ll see you for dinner at about seven.....I hired a cook, a proper chef actually. He produces amazing food.”

“Phew, that’s a relief. I thought it might be a few days living on cheeseburgers, again.”

Olga passed Luca on the stairs and gave her the thumbs up sign. Olga had no super gifts, but she didn’t need any to know Luca’s mind was going pow.

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Sophie loved the rocket launcher; it was love at first sight. Her first love had been a Russian made bazooka Ruby had bought from an arms dealer in Vladivostok. That had been two inches taller than her and probably heavier than her. An old weapon, it seemed they weren’t made anymore. The new rocket launcher was about her height, but much lighter than the bazooka. It came with an instruction book and unlike most people, Sophie always read instruction manuals. By the following morning she’d have read and understood every word. As she put on her clean clothes for dinner, she gave the rocket launcher an occasional glance. The present meant they weren’t going to Mogadishu by air, didn’t it ? Still, she had quite enjoyed the long drive across southern Africa.

“Sarah won’t be happy.” She muttered.

Sophie had bought a party dress in Paris and she was determined to wear it. Black with red stripes and very, very short. The idea that it might be inappropriate for Olga’s welcoming dinner, had never occurred to her. Sophie liked it, so she’d wear it. The idea that it might be a little too short, did worry her, just a little. She did a twirl in front of the full-length mirror on the wardrobe.

“No problem.....It covers my knickers, just.” She mumbled.

The dress had been ridiculously expensive and there might not be another chance to wear it for a long time. She did another twirl and satisfied that she wasn't going to flash her panties at anyone, she left her room.

"Wow, Sophie.....You're.....Gorgeous." Said Spider. "Love the dress."

"Thank you, Spider."

It was about fifty-fifty, between those who'd dressed for dinner in some way and those still in jeans and T shirts. Hers was the only party dress, though Sophie didn't mind. She genuinely didn't worry about going against the tide and anyway, it was true. Wear a short enough skirt and the party did come to you. Caleb was giving her a meaningful grin.

"Sophie.....Is that a knockoff ?" Asked Anna.

"I hope not, I bought it at the Versace store on Boulevard Hausmann."

That gained her a lot more attention and she began to understand the whole fashion thing. It was all about getting attention, the right kind of attention. Wasn't it ?

"Please be seated, dinner is about to be served."

Shouted a man wearing a chef's hat, the kind as high as a top hat. There were labels with names on, she was sat between Charlotte and Roger. Of course, her dress rode up as she sat down, so she shuffled her chair further under the table. She was opposite Caleb, who was smiling at her more than he had ever done up until then. It seemed legs had some kind power over young men.

"I love your dress." Said Ruby, as she sat down.

It was going to be that kind of night; Sophie could see the pattern emerging. Embarrassed one moment and pleased by compliments the next. It was Kallina's fault of course and Ruby's, their second mother. They'd been taught languages and how to fight with all sorts of weapons. But the important stuff, the things that really mattered.....Sophie had been born in eighteen eighty seven and she still couldn't tell if a man liked her, or was just being an idiot.

"I am impressed Olga, there's even a printed menu." Said Lily.

"I take no credit for it, the chef did it all."

The food and drink were amazing, Olga had obviously spared no expense. Sophie couldn't help wishing though, that were out on the road. She'd enjoyed cooking breakfast for everyone out of the back of a four-wheel drive truck. They'd had some memorable meals on the drive from Kenya into Uganda. Even if it was sometimes just heating up the contents of a few tins.

Eventually the meal ended and they were left with brandy for those who wanted it. Olga placed a large map of Africa in the centre of the table.

"Oh, are we driving right across Africa ?" Asked Sarah.

"I'll walk to Mogadishu if I have to." Said Ruby. "My guess is that Olga will have worked out a quicker way for us to get there."

"I have, though there might be more risk involved than going cross country by road." Said Olga.

"Speed matters, this time.....My fault, Kallina has already had far too long to rest up and heal. What have you come up with ?" Asked Ruby.

Olga was putting a salt dish near Mombasa in Kenya and a sauce boat next to Mogadishu in Somalia. So easy on a map, to mark one of the most dangerous places on the planet. Somalia was a land with no laws, no rules, no proper government. Sophie had heard that even Max, had needed to defend his compound against thieves and cutthroats.

"There are advantages to running a transport company." Said Olga. "I can hire a plane and put money in the right hands. Nothing flashy, the plane will be designed for parcels, not people. I can get you and your equipment to Nairobi, with no one knowing you're there."

“Sounds like bring your own cushion and refreshments.” Said Anna.

“A bit worse than that, the flight won’t be nonstop.” Said Olga. “With the usual drops and refuelling, the flight will take.....Close to a full day. I will make sure there’s food that won’t go bad and plenty of water. It won’t be a comfortable flight.”

“We crossed North Korea on a train.” Said Charlotte. “A long plane ride doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Even I can survive twenty four hours on a plane.” Said Sarah.

There was a little laughter, until Olga mentioned that toilet facilities would be a few buckets, with lids. Olga seemed to think stressing the buckets had lids, would sweeten the pill. It didn’t.

“Alright, we’re in Nairobi and no one knows we’re there.” Said Ruby. “So, where do we go from there ? I’m assuming by the position of the salt, that we’re driving to Mombasa ?”

“You’re not driving anywhere.” Said Olga. “My transport company will get you to Mombasa, in the back of a routine delivery by trucks. About eight or nine hours in the back of a truck I’m afraid, but there will be food and I’ve even asked them to put in a chemical toilet. Not exactly the Ritz, but you’ll get to Mombasa in one piece.”

“It’s a boat from there isn’t it ?” Asked Sarah. “I knew we’d end up on a crappy old boat somewhere.”

“Isn’t that the modern pirate coast ?” Asked Sophie. “Assuming we are going by boat ?”

“We survived crossing the Caspian Sea during a war.” Said Spider.

“There’s always a war in that region.” Said Sophie.

Olga placed the picture of a ship on top of the map. Actually, the picture was of a modern looking freighter and she dropped it with a bit of a flourish.

“The Ajax, operating out of Piraeus.” Said Olga. “Or at least she officially operates out of Piraeus. In reality the captain runs cargo of all kinds, in and out of small ports on the East African coast. The cargo is often something the major shipping lines won’t carry. They pay off the pirates, so you should have a pleasant voyage. Not fast, it’ll take you two or three days. Crossing the border though and going by road.....Far more dangerous than going by sea.”

Ruby got up and looked at the map, using her finger to trace the sea route along the coast.

“I really don’t fancy three days on a boat, I was hoping for something quicker.” Said Ruby. “I see your point about safety though. Plus, it’ll be nice to arrive in Mogadishu without anyone knowing we’re there, including Max. Alright Olga, we’ll use your long and scenic route.”

“Are there proper cabins on the boat ?” Asked Sarah.

“Yes, the captain does take passengers as well as cargo.” Said Olga. “I’ll arrange for paid guards at the other end, just to make sure you’re not hassled at the docks. After that.....I’m sure you can look after yourselves.”

“I’m sure we can.” Said Charlotte.

Sophie could feel the tension coming from Lily, as she began to wave her hand at Olga.

“Please....Can we talk about the people who abducted Caleb and myself ?” Asked Lily. “We were hoping you’d know something about them.”

“I do and I will talk to you about it.” Said Olga. “Tomorrow you will have my full and undivided attention. For tonight though, I’m going to get very drunk with some old friends.”

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Ruby had intended to spend her first full day in Budapest, by going into full tourist mode. There was so much history to gawp at, while aiming her phone’s camera at everything. It was fun, it was traditional. On other trips they’d been trying to avoid enemies, but not this time, not really. Nari had

felt a presence in Belgium, but they seemed to have lost whoever was following them. Charlotte had taken several of the wunderkinds on a walking tour of the city, with Luca as their guide.

"We could look over the building during the day." Said Lily. "Just a look, I'm not suggesting we break in or anything."

The problem had been Olga. She'd had a bad hangover and that tended to make her a little over talkative. Over breakfast she'd told Lily that she was eighty percent certain she knew the man's face Caleb had described.

"A data broker, a dealer in information." Olga had said. "He will have simply acquired the information for another client, who might well be another broker. Finding the ultimate purchaser of Caleb's stolen data.....It might be impossible."

Ruby knew Olga well enough to take everything she said after a boozy night, with a huge pinch of salt. Lily didn't though and after Olga had supplied a name and an address for the data broker, it was impossible to stop her. Lily was quite capable of trying to burgle the office on her own. Ruby had taken Sophie with them, though she'd refused to add Caleb to their threesome.

"One of you to keep an eye on is quite enough, Lily."

One of Olga's people drove them in an ancient looking Toyota Prius. Olga preferred to use old cars, believing that they merged into the background better than top of the range SUVs. It was annoying to be driven past a museum and a cathedral, she'd been wanting to see for ages. She let the driver go about two blocks from their destination, saying they'd get a taxi back.

"I need to get a bit of a walk." She said. "We're not far from where Julius has his office."

Julius Sima was a Hungarian who'd lived and worked in the USA for years. Olga didn't know why he'd returned to Budapest, but he obviously hadn't returned without resources. His office not far from the Vasas SC ground was in a new development. Judging from the name board, he had the entire third floor.

"There seems to be money in data broking." Said Lily.

"We could take the elevator up to the third floor." Said Sophie.

"Alright, but no further than that.....Not for now." Said Ruby.

An hello and her smile on about a tenth of full power and the woman on the main reception desk, had no problem with them entering the building. Lots of CCTV everywhere, it wasn't going to be an easy building to burgle, even with a little stealth. New buildings could be a nightmare with CCTV, pressure pads under floors and even heat sensors to detect human body heat.

"We're just looking Sophie." Said Ruby. "No finding an excuse to go full on Rambo."

"As if I would."

"Are you guys always like this ?" Asked Lily.

"Pretty much." Said Ruby.

The elevator purred; the way only brand-new elevators can purr. It even smelled new, a mixture of new car interior and high-quality carpeting. The third floor reception was looked after by a man, who fell for Ruby after the mildest of her smiles.

"I'm looking for Emilio." Said Ruby. "I believe he works here."

"I'll check our office directory."

Doors everywhere, no corridors at all. Wherever she needed to go as the shadow, would be through doors. While the man checked a computer screen, Ruby looked around.

"It's a lovely new building." She said.

"Yes, we've only been here for six months." Said the man. "The last place wasn't this nice."

By the time she'd heard there was no Emilio in the building, she'd memorised enough points of reference to return there as the shadow. A full reconnaissance was the sensible plan, though that meant the whole business taking another day or two.

"Well, are we coming back in force tonight?" Asked Sophie, when they were in the elevator.

"I'm not sure yet." Said Ruby.

"I want to come if you do." Added Lily.

"You did the MI6 tough guy course, didn't you?" Asked Sophie.

"Yes, I was the only woman in that year's intake."

"Alright....I get the hint." Said Ruby. "If we go in hard, Lily can come with us."

She had the taxi drop them fifteen minutes walk from Olga's newly acquired mansion. Partly to give them a chance to spot anyone following them. Mostly though it was about a nice walk on a fairly decent, dry day in Budapest. There was a small courtyard quite close to where Olga lived, an area of grass and trees with a couple of benches to sit on. Ruby prided herself on reading people, using her gifts and the twenty seven years of experience life had thrown at her. She was never taken by surprise, not ever. Yet, as the pretty girl ran a sharp knife over her stomach, she hadn't seen it coming. No mental signs of stress coming from the girl, or any iffy body language. Ruby had avoided being shot by professional hardmen, yet a girl of no more than eighteen had cut her.

"Mind your own business in future." Said the girl.

Ruby struck the girl, a fairly hard punch to the side of her head. The girl was out cold, Lily helped lower her onto the nearest bench.

"Oh Ruby, that cut looks nasty." Said Sophie.

A long cut by a sharp knife, though it hadn't gone in deep. A cut intended to deter curiosity, nothing more. It probably meant the person who'd sent the message, didn't understand her that well. She was now determined to take the fight to the mysterious Julius Sima.

"It looks nasty, but it's shallow." Said Ruby. "I've had far worse, it'll heal. I always heal."

Sophie was pulling at the unconscious girl, looking at everything in her pockets.

"Careful Sophie, we don't want to look like muggers." Said Ruby. "I doubt if you'll find anything. She's like Caleb, I felt nothing from her mind before she cut me, nothing at all. This girl will have been given instruction that even she will have now forgotten. Some very skilful mental manipulation skills are being used by someone."

"Nothing, not even any money." Said Sophie. "Do we take her with us?"

"I can hardly fill Olga's house with confused amnesiacs. We'll leave her here; it seems safe enough. When she comes round, I have no doubt our sleeping beauty will simply go home."

"We can't let this Julius person get away with it." Said Lily.

"If Olga doesn't know where he lives, I guarantee she'll be able to find out fairly quickly. Tonight, we'll pay a visit to Julius Sima at his home, just after he is likely to have settled down for the night."

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Olga had called in a few favours and found out where Julius lived. He had a large house in the town of Pécel, about fifteen miles from the centre of Budapest. A large house quite a way from any neighbours, which meant going in under stealth rules, was no longer essential. Pécel was still in the Budapest metropolitan area, in Pest County, which had given Sarah the giggles. Lily had been allowed to go with them, in the back of an old Citroen provided by Olga. They'd also been given two other fairly geriatric vehicles.

"Any problems, torch the cars." Olga had told them. "They're just about untraceable and definitely not traceable to me."

A weird thing to say, which had got Lily wondering about whose door the cops might be banging on, if they had to ditch one of the cars. Lily was just glad to be invited though, Caleb had been left behind. There had been excuses, but Lily could tell Ruby simply didn't trust him and probably never would. Olga had been given permission to duct tape him to a chair, if he tried to leave her house. "Don't worry, I'll tell you everything we find out." Ruby had told him.

Lily felt trusted, even more so when Olga had given her a hand gun with a silencer attached. Only to be used in case of dire need, but just having it in her hand, made Lily feel braver. She was currently stood next to Charlotte and Nari, less than fifty feet from the large house owned by Julius Sima. Not much in the way of outside lighting, with clumps of bushes and trees, nice and close to the house. It was a home invader's wet dream, as Nari had whispered to her. It didn't necessarily mean that Julius hadn't taken steps to defend his house from attack. The interior might well be swarming with guards.

"We'll wait for Sophie to look the place over." Said Charlotte.

It was about one in the morning, with no street lighting and just a few lights above doors. Sophie was impossible to see, but they knew she'd be doing her thing. Sophie was going to levitate and criss-cross the building, while feeling for the aura of humans. Sophie's efficiency was legendary. In a few minutes Charlie heard from Ruby, via the mental link they shared.

"Either he has a lot of friends who like to wander about in the night." Said Charlie. "Or, he has at least a dozen guards. All wide awake and active. Sophie thinks our target is likely to be in the large upstairs bedroom, at the rear of the house."

Lily had travelled with the wunderkinds before. If Sophie said Julius was likely to be in an upstairs bedroom, he'd be there.

"We can deal with that." Said Nari.

It took Lily a moment to realise Charlie was looking at her, in the dark.

"What?" She asked.

"Ruby wants you kept safe. You could wait here, if you want to?"

Lily's hand felt clammy as she held her gun, she should have worn gloves. She'd always worn a pair of thin gloves for the MI6 training sessions. The house, the guards, the entire scenario; reminded her of a training session she'd been on one weekend. Only then of course, no one had been ready to fire live rounds in her direction.

"Fuck that, I'm going with you." She said.

"Great." Said Charlie. "I knew we could rely on you."

She followed Charlie and Nari, until they stopped in front of a heavy looking outside door. They had a neat trick of doing something to the light, a kind of shimmer. It made them pretty hard to spot in the dark, especially if they remained quite still. Lily had no such skill and felt fairly exposed, as she stood under the light above the door.

"Come on Spider." Muttered Nari.

Spider was the signal to begin, when he broke a window and tossed a couple of stun grenades through a downstairs window. There might be nothing worth stunning, but as Spider had said at the meeting.

"A seven megacandela flash and then a bang of 170 decibels... No one in the house is going to take that in their stride."

It wasn't out of the usual assault playbook, not really. Spider had been in the army for years though, doing it all for real. If Ruby respected his expertise, then so did she. The bangs when they came were loud, very loud. It sounded as though someone had blown up the far side of the house.

“Here we go, keep behind me.” Said Nari.

Nari thrust her hands palms forward at the door, the way Ruby did it. The door was gone, pushed into the interior of the house by whatever forces the wunderkinds used. There were lights inside that weren't that bright, but they'd do. For the guards a flashlight would mean an attacker, someone to be shot at. Similarly, they were all using suppressors, so anyone with a gun that went bang, was going to be an enemy.

The destroyed door was flat on the ground, with a corridor leading straight ahead. There was an explosion to Lily's left, the direction Ruby had picked as her entry point.

“Keep close Lily.” Shouted Charlie. “Remember, if you don't recognise a face, shoot them.”

Which, strangely enough, could have been taken straight out the MI6 tough guy manual. Flowered up a bit of course, with lots of long words, though the meaning would have been the same.

Lily ended up at the back, she was the only one with human eyesight. Nari and Charlie had eyes a falcon would have envied. They could run in places, where Lily had to watch her footing. As Nari ran up a flight of stairs, a man suddenly appeared. He looked shocked, actually scared. Training kicked in though and before he could raise his gun, Lily had shot him in the chest, twice. That was definitely straight out of the training manual. Aim at the torso, it's the biggest target and always fire twice.

“Fuck.” She muttered.

“The first time can be tough.”

Nari had come to help her, but the man was dead and he didn't seem to have anyone with him.

“Not my first Nari, but I can't see it ever getting easier.” She said.

“Come on you two.” Yelled Charlie. “We haven't got all night.”

There was a flurry of gunfire and at the top of the stairs, Spider was stood over the body of a man with a machine gun next to his body. Sarah was there too, using a huge gun to point down a corridor.

“That way, Ruby is about to blow in the door.”

Another corridor, with gunfire again, always slightly ahead of them. Had Lily slowed Charlie and Nari down? She suspected she had. There were a couple of screams, a man in pain by the sound of it. When they came to the end of the corridors, Ruby was stood to the side of a solid looking, heavy door. Two very dead guards had been propped against the corridor wall.

“He's definitely in there.” Sophie said to Ruby. “Near the bed, quite a way from the door.”

“Back a little and cover your eyes.” Yelled Ruby.

Lily put her back towards the door, before placing her hands over her eyes. The noise was incredible and when she turned around, the door and a few feet of accompanying wall, had gone. Ruby was striding into the room, with Sophie and Charlotte following her. It was all a well pre-discussed plan, with Nari left to cover the door. As Lily had no pre-set tasks, she too, followed Ruby.

“Don't even think about it.” Said Ruby.

Julius obviously slept alone, there was no one else in the bedroom. Dark hair with bits of grey beginning at the edges, he matched the description they now all knew by heart. About six feet tall and a little too pear shaped to be good for his health. Lily had expected to find a supervillain, but Julius looked like the guy who stamped her books in the local library back home. He was naked apart from a pair of boxer shorts with red and white stripes. He must have dropped his gun when the bedroom door had hurtled across the room and smashed into the dressing table. Julius had dropped his gun at his feet and was still reaching for it. Lily knew she could make the shot; she'd won a commendation for small arms use. She shot his hand, removing his middle finger in the process. Julius wailed and screamed, but he wasn't reaching for the gun anymore.

“I did warn you Julius.” Said Ruby. “Behave yourself, or I’ll let her put a few more holes in you.”

“What do you want ?” Asked Julius.

“Plenty of time for that later.....You’re coming with us.” Said Ruby.

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