

Ruby 3

Chapter 19 – The Purging Flames

“Luca was a firm believer in science, but she’d seen things. Her family were Catholics and doctor or not, she believed. A travelling preacher had carried out a laying on of hands at their church and a kid who’d been a wheelchair all his life, had walked. They’d all known Jan; everyone knew he’d never walked. He still had problems, but the kid could now get up and dressed in the morning, without the help of his mother.”

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Charlie didn’t have time for caution, or sightseeing. The top of her jeans was turning from a faded blue to red, as her blood seeped out of her DIY wound dressings. Uzi in her hands, she went up the stairs to the second floor.

“Arturo……. I’m coming to kill you.” She yelled.

His floor looked like the boss’s domain; all the furniture in the hallway looked expensive and antique. Two men ran from a corridor to her left, firing handguns. Was she really that far gone, or was it that she no longer cared whether she lived or died ? So easy to have stopped them, turning them into balls of screaming flames, or crushed down into bloody piles of flesh. Charlie didn’t react, until a bullet entered her chest.

“Bastard.” She muttered.

Even then she didn’t use any of her gifts to kill the men. A quick sweep of the Uzi and she was once again the only living creature in the hallway. The bullet had hit her on the left side, just below her collar bone. No frothing coming out of the wound, or trouble breathing. The bullet might still be somewhere inside her, but she’d been lucky. There was the sound of gunshots somewhere in front of her, shots not aimed at her. Perhaps Arturo was having trouble keeping his minions under control ?

“Trouble in paradise.” She muttered.

Even muttered words hurt somewhere deep in her chest, something was badly wrong with her. Charlie passed a window that looked out over most of the hacienda. The fires surprised her, the way an inferno was engulfing large sections of the massive estate. She had used fire though, and there had been a lot of explosions and electrical fires. Even without her pulling fire from the sky, the hacienda looked likely to be burned to the ground. There had to be a local fire service, but she doubted if they’d want to get involved in a war between two cartels.

“The purging flames.” She muttered.

Without counting the yellow auras in the room ahead, she estimated Arturo had no more than ten of his sicarios with him. His forces hadn’t been completely wiped out, many must have run off into the night. Arturo was finished though, even if she died before killing him.

“Be careful with cornered rats Charlotte.”

She really was in trouble. Hearing voices now, the voice of poor dead Serge. He’d have gone crazy if anyone had dared to describe him as a father figure to the wunderkinds, but that was how most saw him.

“He was a lot older than Ruby.” She muttered.

Yes, if Spider could be said to be their eccentric uncle, then Serge had been their father. Never Kurt, he'd always been too aloof, a real cold fish. No wonder when death was close, that she should begin to imagine his voice.

"Wake up you silly bitch !"

Kurt's voice, close enough to make her spin round, causing her chest to explode with pain.

"Leave me alone !" She yelled. "You filled Ruby's head with.... So many rules and morals she could never live up to. Not me, you can both fuck off."

Silence in her head and getting angry had made her more alert. Charlie coughed and a small amount of blood left a misty trail in the air. It really did look as though she was going to die, but Arturo was going with her. She fired the Uzi through the walls, swinging it from side to side until it ran out of bullets. Two handguns returned her fire. None of the bullets came anywhere near her.

"No more bullets now, just me." She shouted.

"You talk a good fight girl."

His voice ? It had to be him, the perfect English with just a slight accent. Charlie remembered the Glock Pablo had given her and took it out of her pocket. Blood on it, of course there was. She had so many bleeding wounds, that everything she carried had to be stained by her blood. Just him and five of his minions now, the Uzi had earned its keep. She still had so much stored energy and it would all go to waste if she died.

"Honey..... I'm home!" She yelled.

Not really aimed that well, the force wall took out just about everything between her and Arturo. Walls, supporting columns, furniture and the few of his men who'd still been alive. Everything was pushed together, crushed and finally thrown out of the building entirely. Charlie couldn't see where the debris had ended up, but it had probably ended up among the banana palms. More fires around her, as electrical fires ignited anything flammable. The floor didn't feel right now. Charlie noticed a certain wobbly feeling as she walked towards Arturo.

"You must be Charlotte Mason ?" He asked.

"Yes, I've come a long way to kill you."

He was quick for a big man, his arm coming up, his hand holding a large, heavy pistol. Anger had left her full of adrenaline though and her Glock was quite light to hold. She put five rounds into Arturo, before he fell lifeless to the floor. Three bullets in his chest and two into his face, while his solitary shot went into what was left of the ceiling. Training and discipline made her put the Glock back in her pocket, rather than simply dropping it on the floor.

"Serge.... Kurt.....I didn't mean it. I loved you both like fathers.....In my own way."

The wobbly spongy floorboards began to smoke, as the fire below them got to work. Charlie didn't have the strength left to run for the stairs, even if by some miracle they were still there. As the floorboards came apart, she fell. Down she went, into the flames below.

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Luca Lengyel wasn't stupid. She wasn't top of her year at medical school, but she was in the top five. She was aware that her new found courage had arrived after a bit of a pep talk from Charlotte. Hypnotism maybe, or perhaps the girl had some sort of spiritual power. Luca was a firm believer in science, but she'd seen things. Her family were Catholics and doctor or not, she believed. A travelling preacher had carried out a laying on of hands at their church and a kid who'd been a wheelchair all his life, had walked. They'd all known Jan; everyone knew he'd never walked. He still had problems, but the kid could now get up and dressed in the morning, without the help of his mother.

"Maybe Charlotte is like that preacher and doesn't know it." She muttered.

Luca quite liked her new decisiveness and courage, though having a gun in her hand was still a bit disconcerting. All in all though, weighing up the good and bad bits of the changes; she was glad Charlotte had taken the time to help her.

“Olga said to stay here, no matter what.” She mumbled.

The firing had started up again a bit further down the track. Lots of different guns making their own individual sound and a shotgun. It had to mean that Olga was fighting a lot of Arturo’s people on her own. Olga was good, Igor talked about her expertise in hushed tones. Good or not, it didn’t seem fair to leave her to fight so many enemies on her own.

“She can get angry, I don’t care.”

Luca left the cover of the dead tree and moved towards the old vehicles that were so precious to them. If anything happened to their cars, it’s be a long and dangerous walk to get out of Culiacán. The car headlights were already dimming, so she turned them off. Complete darkness now, apart from a glow in the distance. Luca walked through the trees and looked towards the hacienda.

“Crap....We might actually be winning.”

Most of the hacienda had to be burning. The light was good enough to show her movement near the perimeter fence. There was the sound of an assault rifle firing quite near her. They were still there and firing. Pablo and the others were alive and fighting. Luca had a smile on her face as she walked down the track to find Olga, until the firing began again.

“It looks like we’re winning....Just keep remembering that.”

She saw the wounded man before he saw her. The way he favoured his right side told her the man walking backwards out of the darkness was wounded. He seemed more worried about what might be following him, than what he might be walking towards. Luca held up her gun ready, certain that he had to turn and see her. Her new found fighting spirit drew the line at shooting a wounded man in the back. Luca had a skill few of the women in her family shared. She could whistle, long and loud. She whistled at the man when he was about twenty feet away and showed no sign of looking at where he was backing towards. He spun around a look of real fear on his face.

“Jeezzzz are they all as dumb as you ?” She asked him.

The look of fear went when he saw her, which was mildly insulting. Pablo had taught her well, no second warnings, she really shouldn’t have even whistled. As the man raised his gun, she shot him, twice. Once in his chest and she hadn’t expected him to fall over.

“Falling over from a gunshot wound only happens in the movies.” Pablo had told her. “Most people will carry on walking or running, unless you shoot them in the head.”

Her second shot was aimed between his eyes. Too dark to see exactly where the bullet had hit him, but he went down and stayed down. Her hand trembled a little, as she realised it was the first man she’d shot at and the first man she’d killed.

“Him or me, him or me.” She muttered.

Luca nearly committed the grievous crime of leaving a weapon behind. Not only might an enemy pick up his gun, she really did need the second gun, and its ammunition. No idea what type of automatic he’d been carrying, but it felt better in her hand than the one she’d been given. A swap, with her gun going into a pocket. Turning him over to look for spare clips wasn’t pleasant, there didn’t seem to be much left of his head.

“You’ve dissected worst in class.....Get it together girl.” She muttered.

Three spare clips shoved into a back pocket on his trousers, the gruesome sight had been worth it. Luca also took a tiny penlight the man had in an inside pocket. Restocked with ammunition and a

little better equipped, she strode down the track. Luckily she heard them arguing, before they heard her approach.

“We should go....It’s over. Once that bitch killed Ami... We should go.”

A male voice in amongst the trees at the edge of the track. Just enough light from the burning hacienda, to reveal he was carrying a shotgun. One of the fancy ones with a rotating magazine.

“Leon will still be alive, nothing can hurt Leon. If he thinks you ran.....Do you think your family will be safe ?” Asked a female voice.

“Alright.....So what the fuck do we do ?”

Luca had no intention of listening to their decision making process. She stepped forward, mainly to stop the branches of a tree from getting in her way. Instinct told her the female was a bigger threat than the male, but he was carrying the serious looking shotgun. No warning, but there were two of them. She felt their advantage in numbers, excused her lack of warrior etiquette. Three times she fired, twice at his chest and once in the centre of his face.

“Bitch !” Shouted the female, as her friend hit the ground.

It was going to be a close thing, but Luca had her gun up and ready. The female was still holding her gun loose in her fingers. Luca aimed quickly and pulled the trigger twice..... Click.

The gun she’d picked up had jammed on her. Not necessarily a faulty weapon or a badly loaded round, she’d once heard that about one in every three hundred thousand bullets misfires. Tiny odds, it almost made her believe in some sort of karma.

“Not your day.” Said the female.

Still not necessarily the day she was going to die, there was the other gun, fully loaded and ready to fire. Backup pieces weren’t rare, but the female might not be expecting her to have one quite so ready to use. Luca dropped the jammed gun and went for her pocket. It all became a question of who could raise their gun, aim it and fire first. The female won, but her aim was crap. Pain as the bullet did some damage near her left knee, but not enough to spoil her aim. Luca fired five times at the female’s chest. The sixth round to her head was almost an afterthought.

“I’m impressed Luca....Though ninety nine times out of a hundred, I’d be wondering how to tell your mother you were dead.” Said Olga.

“I know I got lucky.”

Olga would never have made the cover of Vogue on a good day, but she was looking particularly scruffy. To finish off the look, her right arm was covered in blood.

“Are you wounded ?” Asked Luca. “I left the medical kit with our cars.”

“No, most of the blood is Leon’s. Not as tough as I thought he’d be. All his sicarios were terrified of him. In the end, when it came down to just the two of us facing each other, he was a bit of a pussy. He offered me money to let him escape.”

“How much ?” Asked Luca.

“Not enough. How about you ? How bad is the knee ?”

“Hurts like hell. Not much damage though, I think the bullet nicked a tendon or something.”

“Good job we brought a medic. Come on, you can clean up the wound, while I fire the flare.”

There were only three possible colours, yet they’d had a row over which to use. In the end Olga had insisted on using the green flare.

“Green for go, as in time to get the hell out of here.”

Almost instinctively, Luca picked up the serious looking shotgun and looked over the dead man for anything useful. The fire as the hacienda burned was now bright enough to see the track quite clearly. Sounds too, the sound of cracking as the building began to collapse.

“Is that it Olga ? Did we win ?”

“I have no idea if Charlie is alive, or if Arturo is dead. You and I might be the only survivors out of our small army, though I doubt that. Looking at the hacienda burning to the ground though.... That tells me Arturo and his cartel are finished. Time to fire the flare and go home.”

Luca needed help to walk, her knee felt as though her initial diagnosis of little damage, was likely to be wrong. Her mind was evaluating whether being a doctor with a permanent limp was a bad thing, when they saw Pablo sat in the middle of the track. He’d turned on their car’s headlights again and he was sat in front of what looked like a bundle of burnt clothes.

“It’s Charlie....I managed to get her out of there..... Please help her.”

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It had to happen of course, Ruby had realised that. Their camp had to be where it was, there was no leeway when it came to a fixed geographical location. The sacred stone was just over two miles below their feet, so that was where their camp needed to be. The good people of Tororo had been curious, but a few of them knew Doc and had seen his vehicles before. Groups of foreigners taking an interest in the local flora and fauna wasn’t a new thing. No one asked to see any identification and the stores were more than happy to be paid in dollars. If they were supposed to have official permits, everyone was too polite to mention it. Everything was going fine, until a child from the nearby settlement had seen Tlal.

“I know it’s hot Ishel.” Said Ruby. “That’s no excuse though....I’m told Tlal has been going around almost naked.”

“No almost about it. Not even a loin cloth.” Said Rory.

“My people suffer from the heat more than you do.” Said Ishel.

Tlal was there, she rarely seemed to wander far from Ishel. Not that she’d said much about the incident. Ignore it and hope the problem goes away, seemed to be Tlal’s philosophy. Not an idea that was going to work, now adults from the settlement had been seen close to their camp.

“I know bullshit when I catch a whiff of it.” Said Doc.

Just an ordinary day in the camp they were yet to name. One day soon someone would suggest that the patch of dry ground where they slept, ate and screwed, deserved to have a name. For now it was just their camp. Arguments weren’t rare and Ruby now looked upon them as a safety valve for everyone’s frustrations and anger. She let the row carry on for a while, before interrupting.

“So.....What did the child actually see ?” She shouted.

“It was a girl child.” Said Anna.

“Alright..... What did she see ?” Asked Ruby.

“I was clearing some bushes for where we want to put the equipment being sent from London.”

A rare comment from Tlal, rare enough to grab everyone’s attention.

“What were you wearing ?”

“It was very hot and the work is hard.” Said Tlal. “ I’m sure I was wearing something though, just enough to cover the.....Essentials.”

“I saw her..... She was stark bollock naked.” Said Anna.

Anna was trying to cover herself, she had been in charge of kid patrols that day. The local kids were naturally curious and wandered quite close to the camp. The problem was that the kids had become such regular visitors, that no one really noticed them.

“So.....a girl child got so close to our super-secret camp, that she got a good look at a naked Tlal.

Have I got all that right ?” Asked Ruby. “Isn’t this why we set up kid patrols, to keep the little devils away ?”

More rows, some quite heated. Ruby used to view the arguments as signs of disorder and chaos. Now she looked upon them as a chance to get a little thinking time.

".....are you expecting me to shoot them ? The little bastards get everywhere..." Shouted Anna.

"They've seen Tlal's alien bits.....Is that a calamity ?" Asked Graham.

"Yes." Someone yelled.

"We just pay them off." Said Doc.

Ruby listened to the arguments, while trying to work out how to stop the local settlement from being too nosy, without actually killing any of them. Doc's idea was a slow burner, not hitting her consciousness for a minute or so.

"Quiet everyone." Ruby Yelled. "Doc said something about paying them off."

"Yes, we just pay them to look the other way." Said Doc. "No lies it means admitting there was something to see. Just offer them a little cash a few times a year to go away and pretend nothing happened. People used to use cattle for such payoffs, but any solid western currency will do."

"I could send Kallina for more cash." Said Ruby. "How much do you think we'd need to pay them ?"

"I heard the Americans paid off the Taliban with goats and beer." Said Todd.

"He's right, it won't cost a fortune, these are poor people." Said Doc. "A few years ago one man killed another in an argument. There are no police, families tend to work through a headman to obtain justice. They work to the old rules in this part of Uganda. The man paid the family of the man he'd killed an agreed number of cattle and some cash. Blood money if you like, but it stopped a deadly game of vengeance. I can't see you needing to pay the settlement more than two or three hundred dollars."

"I like the sound of that." Said Sophie. "We could even recruit the kids as watchdogs to let us know if anything unusual happens in the neighbourhood."

"They'll think we're weak." Said Ishel. "Fear always works better than greed. Pay them a visit one night, maybe take a few of their grubby children hostage. They'll behave then."

"That's all your kind understand....Violence and fear." Said Fabio.

The argument increased in volume, though they seemed to be just enjoying the sound of their own voices. Ruby let the flow of words become a trickle, before she interrupted.

"Long term I could turn everyone in the settlement into a willing acolyte." She said. "Hopefully though, we won't need to be here long term. Doc's idea of paying them off sounds to have potential and we can afford it."

"You can afford it." Said Doc.

A little laughter, which settled them all a little. Loud arguments indoors were one thing, but they were in the open. Every raised voice carried, and seemed to make everyone more anxious.

"Indeed I can Doc." She said. "Take a minimum of four people with you and arrange a meeting with the settlement's head man or chief. Actually....Make Sophie one of the four. You might need a big hitter if things turn nasty."

"She's tiny." Said Anna.

"A tiny big hitter." Added Fabio.

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Olga found the green cartridge and fired the flare up and towards what was left of the hacienda. That was it, game over, whether they'd won or not. She was still confident that the ruined hacienda and the deaths of Ami and Leon, had finished the Arturo cartel. Cartels worked on reputations, the perceived image of being tough and ruthless. PR really....And if that PR failed.....Olga was certain that even if by some miracle he still lived, Arturo was finished. The plan was for them to drive down the

hill twenty minutes after the flare was fired. It didn't matter who didn't come back to the cars. Olga was determined to stick to the agreed timescale. Reluctantly she went back to where Luca and Pablo were looking after Charlotte. Reluctant because Ruby was going to blame her for killing her favourite child. Ruby might not come out and say it, but she'd blame her.

"How is she?" She asked.

"Her pulse is weak, but it's still there." Said Luca.

Olga had seen the burned and blackened mess in Pablo's arms. God alone knew how he'd managed to get her out of that inferno, but no one survived burns like that. Head to foot, barely a scrap of unburned skin. No one survived that.....No one. Poor Charlie let out a scream of pain that made Olga tremble.

"Give her something for the pain." She said.

"I have.....Any more and I'll kill her." Said Luca.

Maybe that would be a good thing. Not only was Charlie in pain, getting her out of Mexico was going to be a nightmare. They should have brought Kallina with them, Olga had said that right from the beginning. No one is indispensable, a saying too many people never accept. Olga heard grunting sounds, as two people climbed the hill. Jai and Igor, carrying their weapons and what looked like the rifle she'd given to Aron.

"Where's Aron?" She asked.

"He went after Pablo." Said Igor. "An idiot but a brave idiot.....I heard him scream and that was the last thing I heard from him."

"We could go and look for him." Said Jai.

"No. Get in the vehicles we'll be leaving soon."

It had to be like that, searching for the fallen would put them all at risk. There was no time to bury the dead and no way to look after the seriously wounded. Anyone who didn't answer the flare was considered dead. They'd all known that.

"Did Pablo find Charlie?" Asked Jai.

"He did, but she's not looking good."

Charlie dying and Aron more than likely dead. Hardly a glowing tribute to her leadership skills, but she had known it was going to be a tough gig. On the plus side, they probably had managed to wipe out most of Arturo's army of sicarios.

"I know you'll tell me she can't travel Luca." She said. "But she has to.....We're leaving here in five minutes."

"That's impossible Olga. Just carrying her to the car will kill her."

"Then that will be a mercy. Look at her..... Go on, really look at her. She's going to die...It's a miracle she's still alive. Help her Pablo, get Charlie into the rear car."

"No.... It'll kill her."

"She's dying you idiot."

Frustration more than genuine aggression. Olga had her gun in her hand, aiming it at Pablo. She quite liked him, but he was letting emotions get in the way of common sense. Plus if she was honest about it, she never had considered him one of her men. He was a temp, a hired gun that Gregor had charged Ruby a lot of money to employ.

"Your choice Pablo." She said. "Carry her to the rear car and place her on the rear seat. If you refuse I'll leave your body here and carry her myself."

It had been a tough day, a lot of people had died. She'd killed quite a few of them, Leon's blood still covered the right arm of her jacket. If Pablo gave her any more trouble, she was prepared to shoot. Luca must have sensed her sincerity, she was pulling Charlotte away from the possible conflict.

"Fuck you Olga." Said Pablo.

Tough talk, but he picked up Charlie and carried her to the car. Charlie screamed and each scream felt like someone ramming nails into Olga's soul.

"I'll drive the rear car." She yelled. "Jai is driving the front car. No more arguments people.....We're leaving now."

"But the lead driver needs to speak Spanish." Said Jai.

"Just do what I told you."

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George Polandrous was a regular flyer, a member of the Jetset as it was known in 80s and maybe the 90s too. Now the kids probably had another word for it, they seemed to be constantly inventing their own language. He'd have probably added significantly to his air miles if it hadn't been for the constant threat from the rogue Das Geheimnis. There was a truce though and Ruby now trusted Ishel to keep it.

"Paris always looks so beautiful from the air." Said Dana.

"You can't see the traffic gridlock from up here." Said George.

It had been a long time since anyone had attacked Paris with any sort of seriousness. Even the German invaders during World War II had treated the ancient city with respect, mostly. The result was a priceless jewel of a city, full of beautiful old buildings. The price of course was having to put up with narrow streets that seemed impervious to any modern form of traffic control.

"Beauty always comes with a price tag." Said Dana.

There might have been a first class section, but that seemed pointless on a quick hop across the channel from London to Paris. By the time they'd opened their packets of junk food and drank a glass of passable wine, the Air France jet would be landing at Paris-Charles de Gaulle Airport. George was in the body of the plane, in coach or economy, depending on what you called it. Dana was sat next to him, with Giles sat behind him. A man and woman close protection team.

"Not married, but they are a couple." Penny had told him. "The agency says they're the best they have."

Well, they would, wouldn't they? George already liked Dana, but Giles had barely said two words to him. They weren't armed and there was no intention that they would be. George had appeared on various TV shows and had once been a hate figure for those that saw hedge fund managers as the spawn of Satan. Such people had long memories and a reputation for impulsive violence. Dana and Giles were there to get between him and anyone who might want to harm him. His mind wandered as the usual announcement said they were about to land.

'.....the weather in Paris is a dry twenty two degrees....Thank you for flying Air France.'

Dana stretched and gave a contented sigh. She wasn't expecting trouble and he wasn't expecting trouble either. George sincerely hoped the huge fee he was paying, was just to give Dana and Giles a few relaxing days in Paris. Giles leant through the gap between the seats.

"We've been in contact with Xue. He'll be meeting us once we've got through baggage and immigration." He said.

"French immigration shouldn't be a problem." Said Dana. "We've heard they're having one of their periodic clamp downs. All politics of course, but we might be delayed."

"It'll be good to see Xue again." Said George. "I was certain he'd be retired by now."

“Yes, he did mention being your regular driver.” Said Dana. “Back in the day was how he phrased it.” Was she teasing the business guy in the suit, who was trying to recapture his past? Maybe slightly, though he didn’t begrudge her a little amusement at his expense. They weren’t aware of some of his history with Malou, or the expeditions abroad to help Ruby.

‘Please wait for the plane to come a complete standstill before removing your seatbelts.’

Was there a time when people actually did that? George remembered cabin staff moaning at passengers on an American Airlines flight once, but that was rare. Like everyone else, he opened the overhead locker to get his things.

“That’s alright…….I’ll do that.” Said Dana. “All part of the service.”

Baggage claim was a breeze, with two people there to grab cases and find trolleys. Even French immigration had either given up on their clamp down, or were having a coffee break. They were through it all and outside the arrivals lounge in no time at all. A little muttering into her cellphone from Dana and a large Mercedes saloon arrived at the kerb. Not a limo, Xue had never driven limos.

“You have to be a masochist to use a limo in Paris.” Xue had once told him.

Xue had arrived on the run from China, though George had no idea which side Xue had been running from. For all he knew the small guy being helped by Malou, might have been a criminal on the run. Being a driver with your own executive class vehicle was a god way to earn a living. Decades later, it still was a damn good way to earn a living. George had no doubt that Malou had bought Xue his first expensive luxury saloon. To George Xue had become a constant companion for a while, running him from one business meeting to another. Xue came forward to meet him.

“It’s good to see you again Xue.”

“You too…. Another problem to sort out?”

“Yes, another problem old friend.”

There was that moment, when the years vanished away. It felt as though it hadn’t been fifteen years since he’d climbed into the back of Xue’s car, to be taken to a meeting with someone representing the Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure, the DGSE. It felt as though it was only yesterday, that George had held a gun in his hand and used it to it to back down three men trying to hurt Xue.

“Malou won’t say it, but she misses you.”

Coming to Paris had been a good idea. As George settled himself on the comfortable leather rear seat of the Mercedes, he already felt years younger.

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The car was old but quiet, Olga could hear Charlie fighting for every breath. The girl should have been dead of course, miles back. Maybe it was her imagination, but as they drove out of Durango, Charlie seemed to be breathing more comfortably.

“She sounds better.” Said Olga.

“Her pulse rate is steadier.” Said Luca. “She might actually survive if we can get her to a hospital.”

“No hospitals.” Said Pablo.

Three clunky cars had seemed a liability, they’d looked like a convoy, rather than locals on their way home. The third car had been left in a ditch in Culiacán and everyone was now traveling in just the two more reliable looking vehicles.

“He’s right, no hospitals.” Said Olga. “Within hours our enemies would know where Charlotte was. A few hours after that and she’d be dead. We can hardly claim she was involved in a bad car crash.”

“She has at least two bullet holes in her, maybe more.” Said Pablo.

“Not getting her proper care will kill her.” Said Luca.

“You said moving her would kill her.” Said Olga. “Do your best and remember that Charlie is a bit.....Special. She’s not like most of the sick people you’ve dealt with.”

“She needs blood. Jai is on my list as a universal donor, an O negative.”

“Do you have everything to do a transfusion on the move ?” Asked Olga.

“Ideally I’d never do this on the move, but yes.....I can do it.”

“This road looks as good as any to get it done.”

Olga flashed her lights and began to slow down. The road went through some dry and dusty farmland, not far from Sombrerete. In many ways it was the perfect place to get off the road. Besides treating Charlotte, everyone needed a break.

“I’ll go and get Jai.” Said Olga.

Luca was moving Charlie about when they got back. It was obvious that she was concerned about something.

“Her skin, it’s coming away when I touch her.” Said Luca.

Poor Pablo, he must have really been smitten. The ruthless, tough and merciless sicario was holding Charlie’s hand, as he wept like a baby.

“Crap ! Maybe we should leave her alone.” Said Olga. “If she survives until we get to Guatemala, I can probably call in a helicopter to pick her up. Another damn favour I’ll owe Gregor, but I’m sure he’ll help.”

“You don’t understand.....Look.” Said Luca. “Watch as I push against the burned skin.”

Olga didn’t want to look, the very idea of watching Charlie’s skin slough off her body sounded horrific. She made herself look. Charlie screamed of course as Luca pushed against the skin at the top of her chest.

“You’re just hurting her.”

“Watch Olga..... For fuck sake watch.”

Miracle wasn’t too big a word. As Olga watched and Charlie screamed, the blackened skin peeled away. Underneath was new skin, shiny pink skin that wouldn’t have looked out of place on a new born baby. Too much for Pablo, he began to recite a prayer in Spanish.

“Is all of her like that ?” Asked Olga.

“I’m not sure, but I expect so.” Said Luca. “Look where my finger is.....No bullet hole in her chest, that has completely healed.”

Anyone else and Olga would have said it was impossible, but not with Ruby’s kids. Her wunderkinds seemed just about indestructible.

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