

The Estonian

Five thousand pounds is still quite a lot of money in today's terms. I tried to equate what you can actually get for five grand, or 5K – however you want to look at it - and found myself researching this in a bit too much detail. You can buy a good second-hand car or a new mid-range motorbike, perhaps even a caravan to tour in parks up and down the county (although the ground fees would push things slightly over budget); I could certainly treat myself to a luxury holiday, or a very generous night out, or two, at some of London's best bars and nightclubs; £5000 can even get you a lease on a small fried chicken shop, or a deposit on some merchandise that you could import from China and sell on eBay. I never for one second realised that I could buy myself a human being for this amount of money, but the process was relatively easy.

The Donor had left me a plan, an outline of what was needed to infiltrate one of the many branches of gangs linked to the darker side of London, one we suspected was linked to the Ants. I had quizzed him on the depth of his knowledge, about the seedy underworld of organised criminals, but he remained cagey and tight-lipped; he reassured me that what he was asking us to do had been done successfully before by others. I wasn't allowed to ask about the others. However, to this present day I never suspected the Donor of any foul play in the mess I'd become embroiled in, and I considered him to be a good man with a reliable moral compass. Deep down I believed he was trying to make things right in this world. He helped me even further by giving me a bundle of twenty pound notes equating to five thousand pounds in a tightly packed roll, with some loose change which I could use to carry out the trading process and have as a contingency fund.

Minx had showed me how to connect with groups of men and women on the dark web who had an interest in buying and selling women, and she highlighted many of forums where men discussed regularly paying for sex with prostitutes or 'punts' as they would call it. She had directed me to several sites in particular, however, one of which had a catalogue of women who you could contact in London and read through a menu of their services. We trawled this together, Minx and I, putting together a list of possible names of women who were likely to be trafficked. I felt very awkward, ashamed even, after reading some of the services offered by these women whilst Minx sat by my side. The women we identified through the site were,

we suspected, paying off a bond to their pimp; we looked for patterns in the phone numbers to see if they had been bought as a bundle of SIMS from the same phone company, and if the profiles read the same - this included things like having generic typos, derogatory name handles, crudely written descriptions, and very cheap rates for not very nice services; typically, if the depiction of services offered showed malice and a lack of physical care for the worker, such as unprotected sex (bareback), cumming in any orifice possible, rough role play, humiliation, spanking, then it was most likely that we were dealing with a group of organised men who had a surplus of female stock ready to bring to a thriving London market of Johns.

Sadly, to take the investigation further, this required visits and I had arranged several appointments around Manor House, Green Lanes and Finsbury Park to ascertain the condition of the women working at these addresses, and to scout out the premises. I would visit at various times during the day and night and would pay the women for their time, but they were often unwilling to talk and got angry with me if I asked who their boss was or whether I could meet their pimp. On one occasion the madam came into the room and started shouting at me because I was not 'fucking' but 'talking' to the girl, so she called for back-up. I made my excuses and went. Of course, these visits also included surveillance of each address and Minx and I soon noted a pattern of activity at each property and we could determine whether the same gang controlled each brothel.

We would often talk, Minx and I, during our stake outs and she would chat candidly about Karl and share anecdotes about some of their work together before I became part of their cell. But Minx was smart, and she would never let on too much about her real life and I had to learn to respect her for that. Everyone has boundaries and she stressed that identities - at all costs - must be kept secret in our line of work.

The car that made the most appearances across the addresses was a silver Vauxhall Astra. Each time, two men would arrive at the property and make a collection that lasted only a few minutes. We noted the registration and Minx was able to trace it to an Estonian living at an address in Hornsey. Using that information we were then able to trace other group members who used the same address as their registered home, and slowly we built up a profile of the gang. They may well have been involved in other wrong-doings, such as dealing in drugs and supplying guns to gangs across Hackney, but we were limited on resources and man-power, and so we figured it would be much better to arrange the purchase of a woman from the group online before delving deeper into their wayward operations.

The Donor had been very specific about whom he was looking for and when we presented our findings to him he said that the gang matched all the criteria. Minx had successfully linked them to a group that operated on the dark web, arranging encrypted auctions on apps like Telegram or across comment boxes transversely through a sequence of social media platforms; if you followed the hyperlinks wrongly you didn't make it to the bidding page. These guys were pros. There was talk of fresh merchandise coming in from Moldova and Albania; and on another page there were some small .jpeg pictures of the girls scanned from a passport confirming their nationality and age, seventeen and nineteen; hosted on another page were some very awkward pictures of each girl showing off their assets in what looked like a small hotel room or caravan, perhaps taken before they were smuggled across the border.

A bidding process had already begun and all interested parties who had not bought from the gang before had to attend a pre-meeting, where a non-refundable bond of £500 had to be made to arrange an inspection of the goods and be 'validated' by a gang member. Through Minx, I had agreed to pay this bond – half using Bitcoins and half cash in person. We were given a time and place in Wood Green to pass the money onto a man named, wait for it . . . Igor. I understood that this practice was about gaining trust, a bit like poker where you have to pay the big blind to enter the race; it was a way to judge whether the buyer was genuine and whether they could happily trade bigger payloads with that same client.

I arrived on a bus into Wood Green and alighted near the cinema. There was a busy café on the corner and that was my designated pick up (or drop-off): a location to meet with a man and make payment. In theory, assuming the deposit was made successfully, the next process would be to meet at another location and sample the goods, a very crude way of saying 'have sex with the girl' to make sure that she met our expectations.

I sat at a table and put down a newspaper and an empty brown envelope with three numbers written in black capitals. It was the sign used to identify myself to the group. As my mocha arrived, so did Igor. Normally I would have stood up and shaken his hand, but he seemed in a rush and I took an instant dislike to the man. He wore an old grey beanie hat on his head, his face was unshaven, he had filthy hands like that of a labourer, and he was smoking a very strong roll-up cigarette as he hovered over me.

"Igor?" I enquired.

“You’re British, that makes me nervous.”

“This *is* England and I’m simply a business man looking to invest,” I replied bluntly.

“You look like a policeman,” he said, refusing to make eye contact with me. “Everything about you says I should just walk away now. What do you want with girl?”

“I have very important clients,” I responded, recounting practically word for word the script that the Donor and Minx had given me. “My clients don’t want English girls; they talk too much and complain when things get rough. They want good European girls who do what they’re told and keep their mouths shut, unless they’re being paid to put something in them.” I leaned forward and looked up at him. “If you don’t want my business, then fuck off and walk away. You’re not the only guys selling whores on the internet, and you standing over me is attracting unwanted attention.”

I picked up my paper and started to read, holding it high enough to cover my face so that he couldn’t see me catch my breath and lick my dry lips. He didn’t reply, instead he was busy tapping away on his smart-phone. Minx had deduced that they would have done their own background checks on the user account we created to make contact, she said that they would have their own team of hackers, if they were as big as we thought they were. For that reason we had made several purchases of drugs and other paraphernalia using Bitcoins on a Silk Road inspired site, an underground website where trading in illegal vices was the norm. Minx was good at her job.

When Igor had received the texts he was hoping for he sat down opposite me and began to speak again.

“If you have the rest of the bond I will take this from you now. You will have half an hour with girl, and if you like it then you tell us and we do the exchange in public place. We tell you one hour before deal where to meet us.”

“What if she runs away?” I asked.

“She cannot, you get her papers - you control her.”

“What about the bidding process you talked about. Why do I have to bid? Five thousand is a fair price.”

“That’s not my decision,” he said, sliding across the empty envelope.

“Write the address down,” I instructed.

He shook his head: “Money first.”

I looked around the café and across the road to see if there was anyone studying us. The streets were busy, and there were men stood on the street using phones, sat in other cafes, leaning at bus stops, even sat inside the café. Any one of them could have been in contact with Igor sending him instructions about what to do.

I put the envelope away in my jacket and pulled out another envelope. “There’s fifty cash in there, you get the rest when I arrive at the address.”

“No deal,” he said.

I shrugged my shoulders and pulled the envelope back towards me. “No deal then,” I said. “I haven’t used your services before, and all my other clients usually bring the girl on the first visit. I’m being very flexible.”

The man said nothing; instead he tapped away on his phone, then he waited. This time I watched him whilst maintaining my best poker face until he received a message. He swiftly took my money back off me and then brought out a small slip of lined paper which had been ripped from a cheap notepad; it had a badly written address scrawled across it in smudged black ink.

“Be there within half an hour, with the rest of the money, and enjoy your sample,” he said as he left the café.

That was the easy bit, getting the information. But I knew there were two possible outcomes. One, that I had just been duped and was now another £50 lighter, or two, a woman was now being told to look her best and be compliant, waiting for me to arrive at an address somewhere in Haringey, North London.

I finished my coffee and slowly walked to the bus stop, checking the destination on Google maps. I sent Minx a brief message to let her know that I had made contact and began psyching myself up for the meeting. Half an hour wasn’t very long to convince organised criminals that I was also into organised crime.

The address led me to a non-descript flat above shops on the road between Alexander Palace and Wood Green. I stood at street level looking at the slip of paper and pressed the buzzer. Seconds later the door clicked open without anyone asking who it was. The hallway smelt of damp. There were only two flats. The one I wanted was on the top floor.

I knocked on the door and waited. I could hear at least two sets of footsteps move about before the chain and two locks were undone. The door eventually opened and a woman greeted me, not the one in the passport picture but a more casually dressed lady, late twenties with a black bob and deep brown eyes with heavy make-up. I showed her the slip of paper and she ushered me inside, locking the door behind us. The kitchen door was closed and that was where I suspected at least one male member of the group was waiting, should anything not go to plan. The woman led me to a bedroom and ushered me inside. I sat on a sorry looking single bed in the corner of the room. Pale blue sheets had been used as makeshift curtains for the smallest of windows; I checked them and saw it had been nailed shut. On the bedside table some talc, oil and tissues were my only company, and in the shelf below was a Serbian to English dictionary. The rest of the room had been stripped of all character and warmth; if someone lived here it was clearly a temporary home.

The door opened and the girl from the photo came in. She smelt of overly-sweet perfume and her eye makeup was impeccable. “Hello,” she whispered. Her clothes were made of thin cotton and I could see her underwear clearly beneath it; the bra was ill fitting. She came and sat beside me and looked at the floor, her small bobbed haircut shielding her eyes. I stood up and paraded around the room, checking that the door was closed and listening for people on the other side. I had half an hour to try and communicate with her my intention but was doubtful if she would understand anything I said. I knew the men controlling her would ask her about me and what I did her, so I kept the sales pitch running.

“What’s your name?”

“Ana,” she said, nodding.

“And where are you from, Ana?”

“From Poland,” she said.

“How old?”

“Nineteen years.”

Minx informed me that girls were often prompted to speak little, obey a lot. “How long have you been in London?” I asked.

She took time to process. “How long? I think . . . not long.”

Knowing her English might be bad, Minx and I set about producing a simple slip of paper containing the same phrase written in different languages. Simply put, the message read: *We can help you. Stay calm and nod if you want us to take you out of slavery.* It was plain, direct and almost rhetorical, but before doing so we also suspected that the sellers would be watching, or even listening.

“Take off your clothes,” I said, signing at her to remove items. She nodded obediently and began removing her garments. She was thin, not starved, but her body was in proportion; she had little colour to her skin, more of a milky white complexion, probably from always being kept indoors; her hips still seemed adolescent and she had been shaved around the pubic area; she had a couple of small tattoos around her ankle, and one on her right shoulder. I was neither aroused nor interested in her physically, but seeing that she was so quick to follow instructions I figured that if she had been coerced that there would be evidence of bruising or burning. I sat back on the bed, raised my arm and rotated my hand in a circular motion. “Turn around.”

She obeyed, slowly enough for me to notice a small cigarette burn on the back of her arm, and some bruising at the top of her back just below the neck, like she had been grabbed forcefully. I asked her to come and sit beside me. She was shaking at this point. I held her arm gently and pushed the note on the bed for her to read.

I watched her study the note, her eyes scouring down the list of languages until I saw her eyes lock and focus on the words. Her breaths grew shorter. Then a tear appeared in the corner of her eye and she nodded her head gently. I reassured her it would be okay and held her a bit tighter. I was ashamed that, in England, this could happen with such ease. I didn’t have to ask for her story, not that she would have told me there and then; Britain’s borders were so permeable that the trafficking of women like her was becoming a growing and profitable business.

I honestly didn’t know what to do next. I had hoped she might speak more, or ask questions, but Minx had predicted correctly that she might just appreciate having time to reflect, and so I lay her down next to me and held her, gently stroking her hair, so that if someone were to walk in they would not think otherwise. The saddest thing, however, was the uncertainty; final bidding was not until that evening and I might not be the only bidder willing to pay a high cash bond; I tried to block out the idea that she might be abused and raped later that same day, or had already been subject to such violations earlier that morning.

The sellers didn't care – she would make them money.

After fifteen minutes or so there was a knock at the door. By that point I had ripped open a condom, spat in it and cast it aside on the floor with some crumpled tissues beside it. A man came in and saw us lying there together. Ana sat up and started to put on her clothes obediently. I looked over and saw that it was Igor, the scruffy messenger from the café. He spoke to me. "I hope you enjoyed the sample. I will fuck her myself later."

I wanted to punch him in the face there and then. "She has great potential; it would be a shame to spoil the goods in such a way. I'm still interested - what's the next step?"

"First, the rest of the bond, then tonight we agree price, and if you are highest bidder we can arrange collection tomorrow: cash only."

I nodded to show him that I understood and left the flat without looking back at Ana.

When I met with Minx later that day, she sounded pleased that I had made progress, if you can call it that. Infiltrating the gang was the hardest step, and if I could gain their trust and secure a purchase then we knew that I could possibly go deeper; so long as the money kept coming in and the questions were kept to a minimum, they could continue to feed off me like a cancer until we had what we needed.

Later that evening we received a message from one of the members. They said they were happy to exchange the next day, but that the bidding price was starting at £4000. I asked why the reserve had gone up and they said it was to match the offer of another pimp who had sampled the goods that same day, and because there was a lack of fresh meat on the market. We had an hour to put in our best offer.

£4000 was a good price; cheap for such an item as a living, breathing human being, and getting hold of more cash was not a problem since the Donor had given us over £5000 to buy ourselves in. I suggested to Minx that we might be able to get away by offering £4500 but she was adamant that we follow the Donor's orders. The men we were dealing with didn't seem to care about loyalty at this stage, just a good price for goods sold.

We put our offer in and about fifteen minutes later we got a message saying our bid was successful. The Donor had mentioned that the price would keep going up right up until the day we bargained, so I had to expect this type of greed from such

animals, which meant taking the contingency money with me just in case they refused to part with the goods. We would get a message an hour before payment and collection was due.

I dreamt that night. I imagined that I was somewhere else, another country surrounded by pine forests which spilled out into rolling moors; everything was covered in moss of all different colours. I was clothed but bare-footed and forced to walk across this strange land when I heard a fanfare, and so I began to sprint. But I never turned round to see who was chasing me: I just kept running. I negotiated boulders, scrambled through scrubland and dipped in and out of streams until I came to a cliff. Beyond the cliff was a town, a picturesque scene typical of the Scottish Highlands, and there was a light house and calm green waters rolling into the shore. Dead below me was a rocky ravine, full of bones and red cloaks, books and bicycle wheels. As the fanfare grew louder, a cacophony of angry voices and wild beasts snarling, I stepped off the edge and fell vertically. I focused on the small white house near the shore in the distance until I hit the valley of bones and the dream ended.

I sat up in a sweat. It was around 4am and the moon was shining brightly through my window. I got up and looked out into the garden, and then checked the front of the house. It was quiet and empty like I had expected, but there was one car which seemed to have a small glow from inside the cabin. As I stood focusing on the one vehicle, my veins still pumping furiously, I noticed that the glow was the end of a cigarette, and seconds later a trail of smoke came from the window. I went downstairs and got dressed.

When I left the house and walked towards the car it was quick to start up and drive away. I couldn't see the driver, or the person in the back of the car as it drove off, but I knew that they were there for me and that's when I understood that I was treading on dangerous ground again. As I went to go back inside, wide awake and freezing, I saw a fox staring at me on the opposite side of the road. The moon reflected in its eyes and we shared a moment, two nocturnal beings dwelling in a savage world; it leapt over a fence and out of sight.

I was tense for the rest of the morning, high on caffeine and regularly refreshing my inbox and checking forums across the dark net for any hint of an address or rendezvous point for the deal. Minx messaged me to check I was still happy to go ahead and I had reassured her that I could keep it together and make the deal.

At just after midday I received a message from one of the gang telling me to meet at Finsbury Park station. On the corner of the high road and the station was a coffee shop, a popular chain that was to be our meeting point. I sent a confirmation message and then left the house with two envelopes of cash, wanting to arrive there in good time. It was going to be tight.

Finsbury Park is a busy interchange of people changing trains and buses for most of the day. Coupled with ongoing building work, there is a constant movement and energy about the place, yet there are also pockets of calm when the traffic lights turn red and everything seems to stop and reset itself. I arrived and approached the Costa coffee shop which afforded a great location on the corner of the road, drawing punters in through the two sets of doors and churning each one out with red cups of warm brown liquid. As I approached I saw the man from the day before, Igor, sat with two other men at a table with three empty espresso cups, like they had been waiting there for a while. The men were on their phone but Igor clocked me and nodded for the other men to regard me coolly. I saw no girl with them and suddenly thought that I was about to find myself a few thousand pounds lighter.

“More drinks?” I asked jovially. They all pointed to their empty cups and so I went in and primed myself, bluntly ordering a round of espresso shots from a moody looking barista.

When I returned outside, a space had been made for me to sit down. In their attempt to show some degree of warmth and personality, one of the men cracked a joke that I had women’s hands as I set down their drinks. The others laughed. I gave a pained smile before explaining to the man that his mother didn’t mind them. Thankfully my sarcasm was somewhat lost in translation and I found myself trying to remain disciplined, the Donor’s voice in my head pleading with me to keep cool and not blow the operation with a stupid joke or a slip of the tongue.

I avoided eye contact with the men and looked directly at Igor. “I don’t see any merchandise.”

“Boss coming. You’re a little early. You have the money?”

I nodded. He gestured that I should hand it over but I firmly shook my head.

“You don’t trust us?” he said, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth and his arms open wide in a display of hyper-masculinity.

“I’ve been ripped off before by Turks,” I said, probing them for any animosity against rival gangs.

“That’s what happens when you deal with those filthy animals” he said. “Their girls are usually hooked on heroin and carrying all sorts of diseases. With us you get a nice girl, a simple village girl from a big family; not much experience and most importantly, a nice tight pussy.”

“I learnt from my mistakes,” I said. “They left me out of pocket and feeling very angry.”

“So what you do about it?”

“I organised a hit,” I said boastfully. Realising that sounded a bit American, I went into a bit more detail. “Or rather, I paid one of the Hackney Turks to tattoo one of the Bombardier boys at a local snooker club. I didn’t get my money back, but I got a nice photo.”

Igor sat up, nodding in approval at my lies. “You will like the boss. He will be straight with you.”

I sipped my espresso and studied the surroundings. It was so brazen to deal so publically, but it also made perfect sense and a clever strategy was being used by them. There were no cameras in the vicinity and we were almost in a blind spot, away from prying eyes and covered by a steady stream of moving traffic and a public phone box. The men were all wearing caps and the café had two exits; any of the roads leading away from the station branched off into more roads which led to small ethnic shops, perfect to afford some type of cover should things go wrong.

After several minutes, a well-built man, about five-foot nine and wearing a black hooded Adidas sweater, sat down with us. Ana accompanied him. I smiled at her but she looked away. I had never seen a girl look so scared before and her skin looked blotchy and her eyes were puffy, like she had been crying for most of the night. I stood and greeted him formally, extending my hand. He waved at me to sit, not wanting to make a fuss of the scenario.

“Igor tells me you liked the goods.”

“Very nice,” I said. “My clients will approve.”

“Your clients, do they get through many girls?”

“They have a good appetite,” I said, not really gauging where the conversation was going at this point. “If you’re asking about repeat business then, providing everything checks out, I am happy to work with you again.”

He pointed at Igor to show me what I wanted to see: Ana’s official documents. I flicked through them, at her passport, a copy of her birth certificate, and some fake travel documents that had obviously got her across a border of some sort. She wasn’t Polish at all but from Moldova. Without the documents she was an illegal, someone who would be deported back home should everything not work out.

“If you still want her the price is now £5500,” he said brazenly.

“Why does it keep going up?”

“Because I like her, I might want to keep her for myself. I set the price, and that is what she’s worth to me.”

Ana refused to look at any of us. I noticed that she was carrying a small bag, perhaps this was all her belongings. I knew she spoke little English and had limited understanding of what we were discussing, but that didn’t make my conscience feel any better. The Donor had correctly predicted that these groups used such methods, to try and renegotiate prices after allowing clients to sample the goods – I was wrong to doubt him after a price of £3000 had initially been set online – it was about hooking greedy people in, letting them all sample her. All of the men sat before me were motivated by greed, in particular by the cash in my pocket. It is what had brought them over to London originally, either legally or illegally, to exploit the weak. Even if they trafficked one woman a week at three or four thousand pounds a turn, this equated to around £200,000 of untraceable money each year entering the black market. Each woman was a bond, something to sell and trade up; saturate the market and the price went down, but if the police and border force agencies do their job properly, the price for trafficked girls went up. As for Ana, if I successfully purchased her I would become her pimp and control her, force her to see up to ten or more clients a day at £30 or £40 a time, earning perhaps £1500-2000 a week just from her immoral earnings. She would pay for herself by the end of the first month if I worked her hard enough and then start becoming profitable, and then if after a year or so she started to look tired, or lost her looks, I could just sell her on to someone else where she would have to repay that same bond again.

Not much of a life.

The papers that I held was her original bond, her original debt for travel tickets and a false promise of a new life, perhaps working as a cleaner or a nanny for a nice Western family in England, or perhaps a job as a carer in a home for the elderly, definitely not servicing strangers in a damp London apartment with locked windows.

“All looks good,” I said.

The man studied me intensely. “You remind me of another client.”

I studied the faces around me and grew concerned that I was about to become a victim of my own sting operation. I played it cool. “Is he an older man? Tall with grey hair?”

“No, she is red-haired woman – skin white like snow. Cold-hearted bitch. She wanted girls for client, she never say what for. But she paid well, price six thousand each girl, sometimes seven, even ten if the girl could go high end.”

“What are my guarantees?”

“She does what you ask – you have her documents. I give no guarantees. We have no contract. There are no refunds. She run away, it’s your problem. If police arrest you, you tell them you buy whores off Turks. If anything comes back to me – I give you headache. Today you pay me cash. I’m happy to give you discount on next purchase.”

I loathed everything about him; his arrogance, his whining voice, his grotesque size – bulked out by baggy clothing. I imagined where he might be from, and what he might have been in his country before turning to organised crime. “You’re from Serbia, aren’t you?”

The other men laughed. “Nice guess, my friend,” he said, smiling at me. “But I am man of many countries.”

The men around him were hired hands, henchman from the eastern block – manual labourers turned freeloaders, or ex-convicts who came over on an alias or a fake ID; I imagined all of them had criminal records as long as their tattooed arms and they had now anchored themselves across London, building their own crime network. Minx had done her background checks on the group, and if her research was right then the man opposite me was called Zladic, an Estonian trafficker with convictions for drug offences, trafficking, illegal arms dealings, aggravated assault, rape and

manslaughter, many of them committed back in his own country. Though this information would not show up on whatever fake ID he could produce for me, my inkling was to call his bluff.

“Well, get me a nice Estonian girl next time please – a blonde,” I said.

He nodded, laughing out loud. “Blonde Estonians are very good girls,” he said, “And they make great wives.” The men laughed like robots at his comment.

I looked over at Ana who had remained subdued throughout. Then I removed all of the money, including the extra the Donor had predicted I would need, and packed it in to a paper food bag like they had asked.

One of the men took the bag and went inside the café, presumably to go to the toilet and look inside. I was left in the company of thugs, finishing my espresso and planning my quickest route home. I looked up at the cameras facing the station, not once had they moved round to take a snap shot of our deal, not that they would be able to; the phone box blocked the view.

The man returned, minus the bag. His hands were buried deep inside his pockets. He looked over at Zladic and nodded.

“It seems we have a deal.”

I didn't shake hands, and I didn't look over the moon about it either. I tucked Ana's travel documents into my jacket and stood up. I hoped that the Donor had not paid for this deal with honest money, that he had reused Ant money somehow. But she was now mine.

“Let's go!” I said assertively to her. She snapped out of her trance and followed me to the nearest black cab. I opened the door, let her in and gave the driver the name of my road. As I looked back out of the window and over at the tables, Zladic had already disappeared, leaving the original three men and their espresso cups. They gave me a dismissive hand gesture and carried on talking like nothing had happened.

The journey back to my home was completed in silence. Ana seemed cold and her arms were crossed tightly over her body as she stared out of the window. I sent an email on my phone to Minx telling her of my success. She was quick to reply and tell me that Jo would organise things her end and meet us back at my house.

I called over to Ana, telling her she would be okay. She looked at me dubiously, then down at my pack of documents – her identity. “I’m going to help you,” I assured her. “I’m going to make things right.”

She didn’t speak the entire journey.

When we arrived at my home I took her bag and led her to my front door. She seemed surprised, almost relieved when she saw that my residence was not another basement flat or 3rd floor loft room. I led her inside, sat Ana in the living room and lit a fire, just to try and give her something to focus on and perhaps allow her to reflect on the situation whilst I made a cup of tea for us both.

I did what I could to offer her some warmth, something she had probably not felt in weeks, months even. But by this point I was at a loss about what to do next. I had just bought myself a human being with someone else’s money; a counterfeit mail order bride found through the dark net with the help of a punk-loving hacker who held a grudge against human traffickers, traffickers who might just be linked to Ants, the group who killed Karl. My situation just got a hell of a lot more complicated.

A couple of hours had passed and Ana had not moved, drank two half cups of tea and eaten some toast and jam. She did not try and speak to me or signal for help, she just remained enclosed in herself, locked and bound by morose thoughts.

I was relieved when Minx finally turned up at the house. She had kept true to her word and brought with her a translator. The two of them entered the room.

When I heard the female translator speak I saw a transformation in Ana’s behaviour. At first she looked at them both in disbelief, then with such joy, and then the tears came on instantly. Minx and I watched as she wept and cried and wailed for minutes on end. I suggested that the translator take Ana upstairs, to a room where she could lie down and perhaps freshen up. The translator did so and I was left alone with Minx to decide on the next steps.

“I don’t feel like we’ve really achieved anything,” I said. “We just paid £6000 to a group of wicked men so that they can repeat the whole process and recruit more vulnerable women. What have we actually accomplished?”

“We know that the ants like to dine on young women, and that one of the victims we discovered came through this gang. If we can infiltrate them, gain their trust, then

we can get introduced to one of the leader's contacts – and that might lead us closer to the top of the chain.”

“The top of what fucking chain exactly?” I blurted. “This is all just fucking hypothetical. These mobsters live by their own honour codes. Even if we got to the top, there are probably several other gangs trafficking women to them – they'll just swap sources and keep dragging us along, using up all our money until they realise we're trying to entrap them.”

“You need to be more positive, John,” Minx replied. “When we get what we need we'll give everything else we have to the police. Nothing more – no one is asking you to fight this group on your own anymore. We just need a way in.”

“I'm not sure this is going to yield much. If anything I think my mind has just been diverted away from the Ants, from vampirism; my attention is now focused on this new world of crime and misery. This guy I met today, the ringleader of the gang, I just know that he's pure evil. I'd like nothing more than to remove him from society completely.”

“Then you're no better than them,” scalded Minx. “I can see why Michael used to bitch about you – you don't think things through. You make rash decisions.”

I didn't respond because I knew she was right. I felt cheated that Michael had been sharing his little anecdotes about me with others whilst I felt so alone. I reminded Minx that Michael may have stitched us all up before focusing back on the task in hand. We had achieved something positive that day by taking Ana out of slavery.

I paced about the room for a few moments before changing the subject. I asked about the encryption software she had downloaded onto my computers and enquired whether there was any news on the Ant front in London. She talked about a 'party' that was scheduled to take place in Paddington a few days later and we spent time discussing ways we could try and catch wind of the address.

The translator came down about half an hour later and asked to speak with us. Ana's story checked out and was typical of a girl in her situation: she had been coerced to seek work as a cleaner in Italy but didn't have the funds to pay for her ticket, so she effectively took out a loan with the recruitment agency (a bogus outfit) in Moldova; they took her across the border into Romania and through to Hungary; a second group of men collected her and drove her near the border to work at some bars in a holding house near the border of Slovenia where she was forced to work in

bars and nightclubs as a dancer. She was beaten and raped and forced to have sex with several clients whilst a price was agreed on her head, then another gang trafficked her the rest of the way to the UK where she'd been kept in London ever since. She mentioned that Ana was grateful for my arrival at the flat and for the kindness I had shown her. It didn't, however, prevent her from being violently gang-raped that very night by the men I had all sat with only hours before. It explained everything. None of it was justified. They were all brutes and I wanted to kill them all.

"They're fucking animals," Minx declared.

"Did you tell her that she is going to go home?" I asked. "That we'll pay for her to get back to her family."

"Yes," she replied calmly. "But I don't think she believes me. She is very shocked and extremely anxious about telling her family what happened to her. She thinks they will disown her and that she will fall into the same trap, trying to take up work in another country."

"But then surely there are organisations," I commented, "local NGOs that can take her statement and help her reintegrate back into work if she wants to."

"There are, but a lot has happened and it will take time for her to heal. I don't think she can trust anyone right now."

I agreed, especially men. "We need to ask her about other women she may have met, and other clients she came into contact with. We need to know if her sellers drove a car, if she can remember a house number, a phone number, how many different voices were in the group – anything that can help us close this operation down."

"In time, John," cautioned Minx. "These things take time."

The translator nodded. "She is sleeping for short time. I will speak to her when she wakes."

Only Ana wasn't sleeping. She was in the process of trying to take her own life.

It was during our conversation that I heard a crashing sound from upstairs. We all looked at one another and made a dash for the top floor. The door to the bathroom was locked and we could hear the tap running. The translator called through the door, asking if everything was okay. There was no reply. I went to smash the door

down and then remembered that, as a child, I had learned to unlock the door from outside. I did so subtly, twisting the lock with a coin and then pushing the door too. What greeted us was a bloody mess: Ana lying in a bath of her own blood as cold water streamed over her.

“Fuck!” I remember shouting loudly. Blood was everywhere, spurting from two cuts on her wrists. Minx grabbed a load of towels, I turned the taps off, and we both hauled her out of the bath and onto the floor.

“We need to call an ambulance,” the translator cautioned.

“No ambulances!” Minx and I replied in unison. Minx told me to apply pressure to the wrists whilst she went to ring the Donor for help.

Ana was losing consciousness. The translator told me she was at risk of going into shock and that we needed to get Ana to a hospital urgently. I tried my best to explain that we were in a difficult situation, but then Minx came back in and made the decision easier.

“The Donor is sending a cab – we’re going to have to drop her at A & E ourselves.”

I was frustrated but at the same time relieved. I did not have the resources or medical knowledge to deal with so much blood, and neither did Minx. My hands were now covered in the stuff and I noticed how quickly it seemed to coagulate in my hands. My heart thumped wildly and I found myself strangely pondering whether there was any of that killer instinct left in me; a desire to feed, to make use of this delicate life-force draining away from her. I felt none.

“We need to stem the bleeding if we’re to get her downstairs and out of the door,” advised Minx.

I left Minx with the translator and went to grab some duct tape. When I returned, with thinner towels, I began taping them around her wrists tightly to apply pressure.

We put a dressing gown around her and carried her downstairs, and between the three of us we made it look civil as possible when we walked her to the cab, which had arrived as promised.

I didn’t get a look at the driver but I was adamant I had seen him before, like he was one of the Donor’s special workers who helped during a clean-up operation, perhaps he’d even driven me home after a bloody encounter of my own. Adrenaline had kept me going that night. I hoped that Ana had the strength to make it.

The translator went in the cab with Ana to the hospital. We knew that the driver would have prepared his own back story to tell officers that he'd picked Ana up from a different part of London. It didn't disguise the fact, however, that our plan had gone drastically wrong. Minx and I turned and walked back to the house as they drove off.

Minx sat down in the living room and poured herself a drink. Her hands were still shaking and she was swearing under her breath. I joined her, noticing that I still had dried blood on the back of my hands and spatter marks across my trousers.

"What's the plan now?" I asked, having run out of ideas.

Minx just sat there and shrugged. "We need to pay them back, on Ana's behalf more than anything."

I nodded in silent reflection. Minx received a text ten minutes later stating that they had arrived at the hospital safely and Ana was being treated by a team of doctors and nurses. Then Minx caught me off guard and asked me to pray with her.

"I don't know how," I said.

"Just rest your hand on my shoulder and open your heart," she said.

We prayed together that Ana would pull through, but as we did so I couldn't help but feel that she might have been better off dead. I still had all of Ana's paperwork and if she did survive she would have a very different experience with the Home Office to what we had planned for her.

Minx thanked me and gave me a hug. She seemed a lot calmer and happier once we'd sat in silent reflection for a moment. In many ways it made me admire her more, for Minx was slowly letting down her guard each time we met and I got to see a bit more of the real her. Perhaps Minx noticed this, however, and she put her mask back on as we talked about next steps.

"John, deep down in my heart I know that you're a good man," she said.

I disagreed. "Good men don't want to kill people in revenge, and good men don't bring fear and misery to the people around them. Wherever I go there's a shadow hanging over me." I recounted to her what had happened in Thailand, and what had happened at various other stages in my life during the past two years; how I had tried to protect people, or found myself in a position to do good but chose not to, or ran away when I should have stayed and fought, or how I often left people in dire

need. She assured me that I could seek forgiveness and redemption, that with the mouth one confesses and is saved, but I didn't like where the conversation was going. I needed punishment, not redemption – ultimately I had gone too far and what had just happened was about to push me over the edge.

“You might not seek redemption, John, but I'm going to bring down this group of men who traffic, rape and abuse women with or without you, so you might as well man up and get involved.”

“Do you think the Donor will give us one more shot?”

“If we bend the truth somewhat, we can probably find another way back in. But we will have to put finding Michael on hold for a bit longer.”

I looked at her and nodded. Finding Michael and Ramesses seemed a bit like a lost cause; both men were ghosts lost in the murky depths of London, I was focused now on the ghouls. We had a tangible opportunity to do some good and see our talents put to the test. Vampires, traffickers – they were both parasites in my eyes and parasites are of no use to anyone.

Rather than go to sleep and start a fresh in the morning, we started planning our next move.

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