

Ruby 2

Chapter 6 – Down the Hole

“She’d even cheered Leon Trotsky’s famous armoured train as it had thundered through Moscow, but that had been a long time ago.”

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Sarah’s 30th was approaching fast and Spider was splitting his time between organising events at the Lemon Tree Hotel in Ealing and investigating the death of Natalie Fernandez. The small hotel was theirs now and would be for the next ten days.

“Is it straight ?” Asked Monique.

Fabio was helping her to hang a banner above the main lobby. Eugenie had helped them make it and it was bright and colourful. There were also balloons to be inflated and hung in bunches.

‘Sarah ! Happy 30th Birthday !’

“Down about two inches on Fabio’s end..... perfect.”

He’d decided to turn the reception desk into a bar for the evening. Spider was dragging a stainless steel keg of beer across the room, when the tall brunette banged her knuckles on the glass door.

He’d been through the whole routine several times;

“Sorry, the Lemon Tree is closed for the next ten days. I can give you a number to call ?”

As he opened the door, she didn’t let him get past the first two words of his routine.

“You must be Spider.”

She had to be about his age, but well out his league. Her voice was decidedly on the posh side of well-spoken and her dress and high heels looked expensive.

“Yes, I’m Spider.”

She smiled at him and sat on one of the bar stools he’d put next to the reception desk.

“I heard you wanted to see me and as I was in the area..... I used to work under the name of Fallon. My real name is Mary Dwyer.”

Now he understood, the long legs and expensive shoes belonged to one of Aunty Sylvia’s best girls.

He’d been given a quick update on Mary by a woman she’d once shared a house with in Dulwich.

“Mary married one of her regulars.” He’d been told. “He’s a stock broker I think, happens more often than most people think. If you go through a quiet bit of Surrey and see a woman doing the gardening in a skirt that’s just a bit too short, or heels just a bit too high.”

He’d asked about a contact number, but the woman had asked for some way to contact him and promised to pass it along.

“Can I get you something ?” He asked.

“It’s hot out..... A long glass of cola would be nice, with ice.”

That voice again, she should have been doing voice over work for adverts. For all he knew, she might well be doing that. He’d decided not to ask any of Sylvia’s ex girls about their current employment, it might make them skittish. He poured cola into a half pint glass and added plenty of ice.

“I’m looking for some information about Natalie Fernandez.” He said. “I believe you used to work with her ?”

“First Spider, who are you ? Not a cop, but maybe a private investigator or even a journalist ?”

Charlotte was helping trim the main dining area and Spider called her. He hated doing it to someone who’d travelled for miles to see him, but there wasn’t time to get to know Mary properly. He could

tell her about Aunt Sylvia, who was currently out of town..... It would all get too complicated. Charlotte looked like a student doing some volunteer work, which in many ways, she was. She brushed dust off her jeans and tidied her hair.

“Yes Spider, what do you need ?”

“This is Mary..... Erm, please convince her that we’re friends.”

Monique would be put out, she could make people more sympathetic to his questions, but she could be a bit brutal. Charlotte was gentle about it and Mary wouldn’t be aware of having her mood altered. He’d seen it done before. Mary looked uncomfortable, worried about what he meant. Charlotte smiled and simply talked about the hot weather for less than half a minute.

“Thank you Charlotte.” He said.

He poured himself a glass of cola, but added a good shot of whiskey to his.

“About Natalie ?” He asked.

“Yes, what do you want to know ?” Answered Mary Dwyer.

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Max Krause was as naked as the day he was born. He was worried about the precious parts that hung between his legs. They hadn’t been used in a while, but he still hoped they might see some action, once he escaped. He scooped the congealed spread out of an old margarine container and rubbed it over his shoulders. His hips had already had a liberal amount of Flora rubbed over them. “Urgh, I stink !” He mumbled.

The moment had come ! Desperation had finally overcome common sense, caution and even sanity. There had been no vote, no consensus. Max was going to drop down the hole and into the dark cavern below. He walked over to his new pet and checked that the bird had several piles of seeds to eat and about half a litre of water. The creature had only been a ploy to make Kallina think he was accepting his imprisonment. Now he felt guilty that the bird might die. It didn’t say much, but it had a low plaintive call at sunrise, which was sometimes answered. There were other birds out there in desert and if they could survive, so could he.

“They need strapping up.”

It crossed his mind that he was reinventing the loin cloth, for much the same reason as our long distant ancestors. He used a shirt, to hold everything in place and then tied the sleeves round his waist. It wasn’t elegant, but his soft bits were far less likely to bang against rocks on the way down. No shoes he might need to feel for ledges with his toes. Next his two packs would be attached to his ankles.

“Bye bird.” He called.

He had the packs waiting by the hole. Four shirts in total, carried the weight of water bottles, tins, spare clothing and all sorts of other useful things. The shirts had been tied up with trainer laces and yet more laces were needed to tie them to his ankles. The one tied to his left ankle was mainly full of bottled water and was the heaviest. He eased the three feet of trainer laces over the ledge of the hole and felt the weight pull at his leg. Next the pack attached to his right ankle, lighter, but still a good thirty pounds in weight. He was being pulled towards the hole, but resisted for one last look around the place that had been his home for so long, too long !

“Well old fool !? Still time to change your mind.” He muttered.

Max carefully eased himself into the entrance to the ancient latrine, until just his fingertips were holding his body weight and the weight of his supplies. He let go and felt his body accelerate down the hole, bumping the sides as he went. The first serious turn in the hole hit him like a wall and jarred his whole body.

“Fuck !” He yelled.

A sharp edge on the rocks had cut into him and cut deeply. Pain filled his head and he was bouncing off the sides of the hole and building up speed again. Max had packed six pairs of brand new cotton boxers, mainly to be used as bandages. There were going to be cuts and bruises, he’d known that. Hurtle naked through a rock pipe and trauma came with the territory. The next turn in the hole and his right hip hit something and the pain made him pass out for a second. By the time he was fully aware of his surroundings, he wasn’t moving. He was stuck solid ! Max tried to turn to ease the pressure on his hip and the pain took his breath away.

“Crap ! Don’t let it be broken.” He yelled.

His voice sounded odd, echoey. He concentrated on anything except the pain in his hip. Water; yes the sound of rushing water below him and not too far away. He put his right hand up and felt the hole for a hold of some kind. His fingers found something soft and yielding !

“Jeez !”

Max cursed himself for being a child, but couldn’t force himself to put his hand back to the same spot. He doubted if there were slugs living down there, but something unpleasant might call the rock pipe its home. The darkness that he’d been fearing was now his friend. It hid the nastiness from him, sheltering him like an overprotective parent. He did the only thing he could do. Max rested until the throbbing in his hip subsides a little.

“I refuse to die here.” He muttered.

He’d probably given it an hour, maybe longer. Max put both his hands up and felt the surface of the hole again. He ignored the feeling of something soft and forced himself to probe deeper. There was a solid ledge on his right. He used both hands to pull himself up and turn his whole body to the left. The pain made him let go and he was moving again, hurtling into space with the sound of water below him.

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Spider was beginning to like Mary Dwyer. He’d taken her to the kitchen and made her lunch, which had been a fry up.

“Only thing I can cook.”

“Perfect, but no fried bread on mine.”

Mary had married a client, but not a stock broker. She’d genuinely fallen for one of her regulars, a partner at a large law firm with offices in the docklands. Her voice wasn’t a product of an expensive private education; she’d been to a girl’s only catholic school in Forest Gate. Her voice was the result of elocution lessons and a lot of practise.

“The punters loved it and I’ve done a few voice overs.” She’d told him.

He found himself telling her about his time in the army and crossed the line from asking her questions, to chatting her up, without even realising. There was no problem though, no conflict. It wasn’t as if Mary was likely to betray him to their enemies. For one thing, even they weren’t that sure about who their enemies were. Anyway, it was all nothing but a flirtation, she was happily married.

“So you saw Rob Newsmith quite a few times ?” He asked.

“Yes, him and sometimes his two friends.” She said. “The three musketeers we called them. It was rare to just see one of them, they seemed to like their sex as a group.”

Married woman or not, Spider suddenly found himself wondering if Charlotte doing a whammy on her was causing Mary to like him. Maybe she’d find him scary once it wore off ? Most people did find him a bit intimidating, it was how he earned a living.

"But it was Natalie who saw them most?" He asked.

"Yes, Natalie would do anything and they liked that. If you want to know about their..... Erm tastes. You should try and find Natalie."

He hadn't told her about Natalie's death yet, but he would. It was likely to make her hesitant about talking and he didn't want to have to use Charlotte on her again.

"Were they ever violent?" He asked.

She pulled a face and looked at her shoes.

"Rob always wanted to tie me up, but I wouldn't let him." She answered. "There was a look in his eyes. He could change in an instant from being aggressive, to being a naughty boy wanting me to pee over him. The other two were ok, but Rob scared me."

That was different to Ruby's view of Rob Newsmith as a decent guy who'd simply hidden an unfortunate accident. Spider knew Ruby well enough to know she wasn't infallible, especially if she liked someone.

"Tea or coffee." He asked.

"Tea please."

He made them both tea and sat opposite Mary, wondering how to bring up the subject of Natalie's murder. Luckily she gave him the opportunity.

"You should definitely track down Natalie Fernandez." She said. "She can tell you far more about them than I can."

She dug around in a small handbag and brought out a notepad and pen.

"I haven't heard from her in years, but I can give you some numbers for her friends, the girls from the old days."

He let her write, the names and numbers were like gold dust for the investigation. She tore the page out of her notepad and held it out to him. He held her hand as he took the page.

"I might as well come straight out with it." He said. "Natalie is dead, probably killed by the three musketeers. I'm investigating her murder."

She didn't pull her hand away, as she cried without making a sound. Tears streamed down her face, until she leapt up.

"Sorry." She said. "Can I use the ladies?"

"Yes of course. Through the door and to the right."

Mary took a while to return, giving him a chance to clear their lunch plates and freshen the tea. She looked perfect again when she sat down, not a trace of tears, makeup flawless. Her hand trembled though, as she picked up her tea.

"Sorry." She said. "I'm usually more under control."

"You must have known her well?"

"Not really and it was years ago....." She hesitated. "It might have been me, or one of the other girls they booked. We all knew their games might go too far, but they paid well. The terrible thing is, that I'm not really that shocked by the news."

He didn't tell her all the gory details, just an airbrushed version to spare her feelings. It mattered to him that Mary wasn't upset again. He let her finish her tea, before giving her his Sunday best grin. It was a bit lopsided and scared a few people, but it was the best grin he had.

"Can we see each other?" He asked. "Nothing to do with my investigation."

"A date you mean?"

"Yes."

Her notepad came out of her tiny bag again. She placed it in front of him.

"You can never call me, agreed?"

"Yes."

"Give me your number and I'll call you."

He had his number written, before an idea struck him.

"We've taken over the hotel for a friend's 30th birthday celebration. Perhaps you'd like to come..... they're all nice people..... my friends..."

She was laughing at him and smiling.

"I'm sure they are nice people Spider. No promises, but write the date next to your number."

The thirteen would like her, but Sarah would hate her, he knew it. Spider was happy and he'd deal with Sarah's inevitable tantrum when it happened.

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Sophie was tiny, barely five feet tall. People tended to treat her as the baby of the group, but she was the same physical age as the other, despite being born in eighteen eighty seven. She was just tiny and had probably grown as much as she was likely to grow. Being petite had its advantages though.

"Ideally we need one of them alive." Serge had told her. "Take no risks though. I'd rather both of them were killed than you."

He'd actually kissed her on the forehead, the usually stern and grim Serge. Sophie hovered next to the hotel window, trying to ignore the chill evening wind off the River Danube. People tended not to look up and the street below her was fairly empty. The glass in the window looked filthy and neglected.

Sophie pulled at the edge of the window and it opened towards her. Of course it was unlocked, who'd lock a top floor window that even the window cleaners hadn't rubbed a cloth over in decades. She half hovered and half clambered, until she was stood on the worn out carpet of the hotel's attic. She reached behind her and pulled the circular window until it was closed again. The dark was now going to be a problem, so she stood there until the objects in the room took on a degree of clarity.

"Any problems, get out of there.... Quickly!" Serge had told her.

She was going to move quietly, but she didn't think any staff she might bump into would be a threat. Besides being tiny, she had a mop of brunette curls and large hazel eyes. One smile and they'd be friends, two smiles and they'd do just about anything she asked. Not that Serge wanted her to involve any outsiders in her mission, hiding was the name of the game.

Satisfied that her eyes were used to the dark, she carefully walked through several rows of stacked chairs and opened the door. There was a glow from a light above the stairs that led down and not a sound coming up from below. She took the opportunity to remove her gun from under her jacket and check it over. The Glock 17 looked huge in her hands and the silencer added yet more length. She removed the magazine and checked everything, before putting it back in the inside pocket of her jacket. They only needed one of the North Koreans alive, so she was likely to use the Glock. It had to work and work first time!

"No heroics." Lisa had told her. "Kill them both if you have to."

Lisa wanted to be there of course, wanted to be the first into their room. Lisa couldn't pull herself into the air and hover like a humming bird though. Sophie smiled, knowing that she could do something that Lisa couldn't. Sophie went down the stairs and walked past the staff rooms, most of them empty until the hotel shut its restaurant and bars for the night.

"Oh, that guy in 47..... talk about personal hygiene issues."

The voice was speaking German and on the landing below hers. She gave them a few seconds to move away, before she went down more stairs and into the part of the hotel that guests used. The worn out grey carpet was replaced by a high quality red carpet and everything was dust free. Lisa had found them, by old fashioned hard work. She'd befriended a desk clerk at the Four Seasons and had found the men likely to have killed Tobor.

"Two men in expensive suits, Asian features." Lisa had said. "Rarely go out, eat every meal in the hotel and waiting for a third man to join them."

A walk through the hotel dining room that night had proved conclusive. Lisa hadn't picked up much from their thoughts, but she'd picked up the names; Serge, Tobor and Ruby ! It was them and they might check out and return home at any moment. Serge and his team were a long way from home and the Four Seasons had just had a security upgrade.

"You need a key or room card for all the lifts and stairs and there's CCTV everywhere." Lisa had discovered.

"Fake IDs and credit cards take a while." Serge had said. "We need a plan for tonight. Something thinking outside the box."

Sophie had come up with the plan herself, or rather the bare bones of an idea. Serge had run with it and added a few extras. A key part of the plan was that anyone already on the top floor could use any of the lifts or doors to the stairs. Just so long as they were heading down, it was a fire safety requirement. No one wanted lots of dead guests, trapped behind locked doors. That kind of thing was bad for business. Sophie nodded at a passing hotel guest.

"Good evening." She said, in her best German.

They replied and Sophie continued along the corridor and stopped outside room 156.

"Confidence Sophie." Serge had told her. "Believe you belong there and you will."

She banged on the door in her most confident way, making it rattle in its hinges.

"Hotel management." She yelled. "We have a problem with your method of payment."

German again, just about everyone spoke German in Budapest and her Hungarian was a bit poor. A man in shirt sleeves opened the door, his serious face becoming a smile when he saw petite Sophie at the door. She walked two paces into the room, just far enough to be able to close the door fairly quickly. Another man in shirt sleeves was sat watching TV and ignoring her.

"I'm sorry Miss. We have other credit cards."

Sophie had feelings, she didn't really want to hurt anyone. Tobor had been a nice man though and these bastards had tortured him, plus Kallina thought they were planning to kill Serge. Tobor had given her a beautiful Russian doll once. Not because he thought of her as child, but because he'd heard she'd been born in Moscow. She pulled the Glock 17 out of her jacket and shot the man closest to her. His bad luck to have opened the door, his friend just might survive her visit. Twice she shot him, twice in the chest, before leaning on the door until she heard the click as it shut.

"Be still and you might live !"

He hadn't even moved, she'd acted so quickly. She felt confusion in his mind, that such a tiny girl had proven to be so lethal. One of their guns was in the fruit bowl, with the complimentary apples.

"Pick up every weapon." Serge had trained them all. "You might not need it, but you never leave a potential weapon for an enemy to pick up."

Sophie picked up the North Korean made, fake Browning 9mm and put it in her jacket pocket. She threatened him again, getting in a position to look right into his eyes.

"I know you killed Tobor." She hissed. "Just give me an excuse."

She felt fear in him now and although she didn't speak his language, she picked up the emotions of a man who wanted to see his home again. His gun now, it had to be somewhere ! His jacket was on a chair, too close to him for comfort.

"Is your gun there ?" She asked, using the Glock as a pointer.

Yes, she could almost see the weapon in his thoughts. Sophie pulled the chair back, away from him and towards the door. When she felt it was safe, she threw his jacket into a corner and picked up the gun underneath it. Yet another fake Browning went into her already heavy jacket.

"You might have other weapons." She said. "But I'll kill you before you can use them."

He nodded at her twice, as if agreeing with her.

"Record everything !" Serge had told her.

She moved the chair as close to him as she dared and then sat across it, using the chair back as additional cover. She aimed her gun right between his eyes and glared at him.

"I need the answers to a few questions." She said. "Answer honestly and I'll let you live. Refuse to answer and you'll join your friend. Understand ?!"

"Yes."

She had her phone set so that one keypress would set it to record. She placed it next to the TV remote and used the remote to put the TV on standby.

"I'll know if you're lying." She hissed at him.

He was scared of her, really scared. Someone had obviously warned him about the thirteen and he seemed to realise that one of them had a gun pointed at his head.

"Why are you here ? What is your mission ?"

He answered in a mishmash of German, Korean and bits of English. Sophie almost stopped him, but she was sure he was answering honestly. Ruby would be able to make sense of the recording, or Sarah, who could understand almost anything. It was odd hearing words like Budapest and names like Serge, mixed in with fluent Korean. When he stopped talking, she assumed he was finished.

"Who are you waiting for ? Who is joining you ?"

More rapid talking, with lots of feelings of respect. She recognised the term Das Geheimnis and wondered if she'd heard it right. She interrupted him.

"Like me ?" She asked. "You're expecting someone like me."

He was nodding at her furiously and again there was the rapid speech in Korean. The questions she was supposed to ask had been agreed between them.

"No use in asking about their plans in Korea." Serge had said. "They operate in small cells. All he'll know about are his own orders and events in Budapest."

Still, he kept mentioning Serge. Sophie decided to broaden her questions.

"Were you planning to kill Serge ?"

Lots more head nodding and a torrent of words she didn't understand. Kallina often talked figuratively and they'd assumed that Serge drowning was a metaphor for being too busy. Just supposing.....

"Is the plan to drown Serge ?"

More nodding and as she listens to his torrent of words, he makes a grab for the drawer in front of him. He'd obviously been trained to mentally practise actions, before carrying them out. Superb advice, unless you were trying to outsmart someone who could see your thoughts. She saw him going for the drawer, several times, before his hand ever moved. She shot him in the back of the head, before he could get anywhere near the knife in the drawer.

"They tortured Tobor." She mumbled.

Most of his face was now covering the wall, but Sophie was unmoved by it all. Reaction would set in, she knew that, but not until she was safely back with her friends. They used tennis bags for their clothes, probably thinking they'd merge in with the tourists. Very seventies were tennis bags though, now overnight bags were more likely to carry a Nike logo, or even a Pokémon character.

Sophie put their guns and hers in the bag and the contents of their pockets. She went through every drawer in the room, putting their airline tickets, wallets and passports into the bag. Lastly, she remembered to turn off the record function on her phone and put it in her pocket. No need to worry about fingerprints or facial recognition software on the hotel's CCTV. None of the thirteen were in any police or security service database. They might get to be in quite a few, but Sophie's prints would be a mystery. As would be her DNA, if it was ever tested.

"We're sort of human with a twist." Ruby had once told her.

Her hand was shaking slightly, so Sophie took a bottle of Beck's out of the mini-bar and drank it slowly. Once her hand was steady, she left the room with the tennis bag in her hand and took the lift to the ground floor.

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Max was travelling at speed when he hit the water. No time to hold his breath, water filled his nose and made him feel as though he was drowning. The water was fast moving and fairly shallow; he hit the bottom of the underground river and jarred his injured hip. He was alive though and let out a cheer as he pulled himself onto a gravel river bank.

"Catch me now Kallina !" He yelled.

He coughed and spluttered for a while, clearing the water out of his lungs. It was dark, completely dark. There might be convenient bio-luminescence in movies, but Max found himself in total stygian darkness. He clapped his hand together, listening intently to the result. No echo at all, he was probably in a narrow fissure the river had formed.

"At least I won't starve for a while." He muttered.

Max pulled his homemade packs from the water and they were sodden, but intact. He untied them from his ankles and used the trainer laces, running them through the sleeves of the shirts to make handles. He'd practised the task so often in his prison, that it wasn't that hard to do in the dark. Next step was to make sure he wasn't slowly bleeding to death.

The first collision with the wall had caused a gash in his lower back. It was one of those occasions when being virtually naked was useful. He felt the hole in his back and winced ! It wasn't as bad as he'd believed and was unlikely to bleed enough to kill him. The river water had given the wound a good wash and he'd just have to take his chances on getting an infection. He carefully removed his loin cloth, wincing again as he touched his injured hip. Lots of minor cuts and some gravel had been driven into the wounds. He sat himself in the water and rubbed at the cuts, until they were as clean as he could make them.

"At least it's the opposite side to my crap knee." He muttered.

Something was damaged in his hip, something deep inside. Maybe a chipped bone or something, it hurt as he walked, hurt a hell of a lot. Max knew his body would swell up and the joint would stiffen. It was nature's way of making damned fools like him, give a damaged joint a chance to heal. Max had no pain killers or anti-inflammatories, so he'd just have to keep the joint mobile by walking on it. For a few seconds he looked into the total darkness and felt despair. He'd been in other bad situations though and survived them.

"At least I'm free."

Max had a big decision to make. Follow the direction the water was flowing, or walk the other way and hope to find where the river entered the caves. Both options had their own risks. Following the flow was likely to take him deeper underground. The other direction might take him to the surface, but the river could well have entered the caves hundreds of miles away. It was a lottery really, either direction might kill him or save him. Max chose to follow the flow of the river. He held a pack in each hand, pushing his foot out in front of him, to avoid bumping into walls or falling over a precipice. His progress was going to be slow and the packs would quickly feel like lead weights.

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Ruby had decided to let Murad stay for Sarah's birthday extravaganza. It was becoming a nuisance to have him as a semi-permanent fixture on her sofa, but she didn't have the heart to send him home. He was one of them now, almost family. Every day he learned more about her and the thirteen. Every day his jaw dropped at what he'd learned. There was no option other than making him some sort of honorary Scooby. George was expecting her, he was going to be her man in London again, the poor devil wondering whether they were alive or dead.

"Poor George." She muttered.

She sat at her dressing table that was covered in far too many cosmetics and decided that she looked good enough for breakfast with George. Serge had called her with the good news that the problem in Budapest had been dealt with. Tiny Sophie had been the hero of the hour and he was bringing them all to London, with a bag full of information for her to look at.

Ruby picked up the translation of the words on the gold brooch. George might be interested in it and she wanted him to feel back in the loop. Sarah's friend from college had told her the language wasn't actually Sumerian.

"Much, much older, but from the same origins. I can give you a gist of what it says."

His name was Noah and he really had published a book on the Sumerian language. He'd eaten a lot of pizza and drunk half a bottle of her decent merlot, but he had given her a translation.

"It's lots of ways of saying this is important." He'd said, while fondling the brooch.

"Think of it as someone from about eight thousand years ago, telling you to hang onto this, because you'll need it." He'd added.

Not her personally of course, but Ruby understood what he meant. The brooch would go in her bags and travel with her to Korea.

"Can I use your Ipod while you're out?"

"Ok, just don't change any of my playlists."

She had no idea who'd called her, probably Charlotte, but it might not have been. She was officially beginning to feel like their mother. Ruby checked she had everything essential and left her apartment. Spider had been trying to talk her into carrying a gun, a small automatic in her shoulder bag. She really did hate guns and only used them when there was no alternative. The problem with a gunshot wound was that there was no saying sorry and taking it back. It was a nice sunny day and she decided against finding a taxi. Ruby headed for Hackney Downs station instead.

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Kallina was fond of railways, most Russians are. The trains had run on time right through the revolution and the railway workers had played a major role in that nineteen seventeen revolution. Kallina's political views were as varied and malleable as her various religious convictions, but she'd always had a soft spot for the railways. She'd even cheered Leon Trotsky's famous armoured train as it had thundered through Moscow, but that had been a long time ago.

Tumangang wasn't Moscow, it wasn't even somewhere that North Korean's thought much of. Once, before the fall of the Soviet Union, the town had been where all the trains from Russia arrived. Most carried on down the coast to Rajin Port, but a few people had disembarked at Tumangang. They'd had proper tourists in those days, spending real money. Now the Soviet Union was gone and the hundreds of trains a week had slowed to a trickle. A lot of people didn't even realise that Russia had a border with North Korea, but it was there, a few kilometres of border near the coast. At one time trains had been sent from Russia to feed the people of North Korea, but no more. Some trains still arrived and the supplies they brought were appreciated by the hungry people of the Soviet Union's old ally. Putin had other uses for Russian money now and China viewed North Korea as an embarrassment. Like a slightly dotty relative who annoys the neighbours and blights the entire neighbourhood.

Kallina stood right at the end of a platform on Tumangang Station, watching one of the now rare trains, as it switched onto the Hongŭi Line of the Korean State Railway and headed south.

"It's actually on time." She muttered.

She was wearing clothing which covered her from head to foot, a scarf covering her western features. There were few staff at the station and the rare people she had seen, had completely ignored her. Kurt had his own reasons for using the route through China, but he'd had a few problems using that route. Westerners stood out, they were instantly recognised as outsiders, people who didn't belong. Kurt had been shot at several times, by overzealous local militias of one kind or another.

Not a plan, not even a proper idea, but Kallina felt the seed of an idea. Ruby had asked her to scout ahead and think of ideas. The railways had been a fairly obvious place to look. Trying to sneak in over the Sea of Japan would be suicide and travelling in from China was a problem. The only route into North Korea that was still relatively open, was the railway from Russia. The freight cars were simply switched to a Korean locomotive and taken south. From Rajin Port there was even a branch line, going north to the research facility.

"It just might work." She mumbled.

Kallina had watched several trains over the course of a few days and not a single freight car had been opened and searched. Her seed of an idea was beginning to germinate. Most of the thirteen looked western, but Kallina even had a few ideas about that. They were all going to discuss the various options after Sarah's birthday party and Kallina was certain she'd found an entry point to cross the North Korean border. One that wouldn't mean ending up in the middle of miles of inhospitable terrain.

She was so happy, that she decided to buy Max something nice from his favourite New York deli.

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