

Ruby 2

Chapter 2 – Ruby’s Funeral

“There were risks of course, but it wasn’t just Ruby who wanted to know what the Chinese had dug up in one of their rare earth mines near the City of Baotou.”

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Sir Edwin Fox had no idea of the time, he seemed to almost live in his office and the blinds were always closed. There was light seeping through the edges of the blinds, so it still had to be daylight hours. A large twenty four clock adorned the wall in front of him, but he rarely looked at it. He was like most people who sit at a desk all day; he looked at the bottom right of his computer screen if he was that interested in the time. Not that he was interested; he was more concerned about events in China. His phone made a trilling noise and the screen told him it was ‘Vauxhall.’ The egotists of MI6 in their barely converted luxury hotel, with gold plated taps in the washrooms.

“Hi Phil, what have you got for me ?” He asked.

“There’s no increase in activity in the vicinity of Jingdao Island. The locals seem to be unaware of anything you might have going on there.”

Oh they’d love to know about Ruby, but luckily the level of command was in his favour. He could ask them anything and they were duty bound to tell him, but he had to tell them nothing. It was an arrangement that gave him constant pleasure.

“Great news.” He said. “Keep me informed if that changes.”

He heard Phil cough, a sign he was agitated. Phil would never make a good poker player and he’d have made a lousy front line spy.

“Foxy, we have a government paranoid about upsetting Beijing. Is there anything you’d like to share ?”

Sir Edwin’s department had been set up to stop various rogue factions in the security services. He quite liked Phil, but he wasn’t going to put up with a lecture from him.

“Just call me if things heat up anywhere in or around Beibu Gulf.”

A government paranoid about Beijing didn’t come close to describing it. The current chancellor would have gladly arranged a few hookers to get better trade with China. Governments were here today and gone tomorrow creations, truly ephemeral. He saw it as his duty to protect the nation and if that meant upsetting Beijing.....

“Coffee sir ?”

“Oh yes Lily.” He replied. “And a couple of chocolate biscuits, if there are any left in the tin.”

She smiled at him, there were always a few chocolate biccies left. Lily was only about twenty one, but she’d turned out to be the best personal assistant he’d ever had. She wore outrageous clothes, but there was no dress code in his department. Like many girls her age, she had more tattoos than a forty year old biker. Her grandfather had been an admiral though and although he couldn’t be certain she wouldn’t put all their files onto a thumb drive and send it to the papers, he’d doubted she would.

“What’s the weather doing ?” He asked.

She had to go to a window and pull the blinds apart to see. It might be raining, hail the size of golf balls or a heatwave. They all spent a huge part of their lives under artificial light, wondering about places a long way from Britain.

“Uurgh, looks a bit wet out.” She said.

“It’s Kent Lily, it always looks a bit wet.”

She went to get coffee and left a hole between the bent blinds. It did look dark and wet out, like the day he’d attended Ruby’s funeral. That had been a strange occasion, but someone had to organise it, she could hardly do it herself. A surprising number of her old friends had turned up, including a girl called Angela, who’d cried solidly, right through the service. Foxy hadn’t known how to answer their inevitable queries and had tried to hint that Ruby had died serving her country.

“You should be very proud of her sacrifice.” He’d told her mother.

It was true of course, in a bizarre kind of way. Ruby had died on her journey across Romania, the DNA of the body in the coffin proved it. Yet she lived and had been with Serge in Marseille, at the time of her funeral.

“Thank you Lily.”

She left him coffee and three biscuits on a delicate looking porcelain plate. Lily closed the gap in the blinds and closed his office door as she left. Ruby’s funeral had been just one strange paradox among many at the time. None of her new friends had attended the funeral, apart from Kallina, the blonde Russian girl. That was odd too, there was no record of her entering or leaving the country. She’d been polite, just standing about and muttering, refusing an offer to attend the family gathering afterwards.

“She knows how a dead girl can walk among us.” He muttered. “And the mysterious Kurt Trifonov, where have you vanished to ?”

Ruby claimed to be as mystified by the body in Romania as he was. It was all an impossible paradox, but one he was obsessed with understanding. Not that her death hindered Ruby’s life at all, a few changes to various databases and her passport still worked, as did her driving license. Could she do the trick again though ? Was Ruby immortal ?

Sir Edwin entered the password into his computer and pulled up the map for Jingdao Island. Not the fiction on Google maps, of the scenic tourist centre with hotels and even a shopping centre. That was all there, but the satellite pictures showed a deeper truth. Rows of what looked like buildings on a science park, but were in reality a government storage facility. Miles of it, dozens of buildings, almost a secret town.

It was the Chinese equivalent of Area 51, but without all the cool movies made about it. Right up against the Vietnamese border, far away from any important assets. If you wanted to store something that might have a nasty surprise in store, Jingdao was the place to put it.

“She’s versatile.” He mumbled. “She’ll be fine.”

Ju-Long was his contact now, though he had originally been groomed by MI6. There had been the cuts and Ju-Long had seemed of little worth. He’d been given a small sum of money and a thank you from his handlers and left to get on with his life. Then there had been the deaths of a few scientists and things had warmed up a little in South East China. Upset relatives who think they’re being told lies can cause trouble, even in a country like China. Some had even posted a few tweets, until they’d been deleted. It all pointed to Jingdao and Ju-Long found himself to be wanted by Britain again. He was untried though and seemed to be completely paranoid. Ruby wasn’t aware of just how unstable Ju-Long was likely to be, or the nature of his recent demands.

“She’ll cope. She’s very.....versatile.”

He muttered as he drank his coffee and nibbled at the biscuits. There were risks of course, but it wasn’t just Ruby who wanted to know what the Chinese had dug up in one of their rare earth mines near the City of Baotou. They’d found whatever it was deep underground, very deep.

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The shipping lanes through the Beibu Gulf were busy and their tourist Junk wasn't getting a second glance from anyone. Large bulk carriers, tankers, all mixed up with small local craft, it was the perfect swarm of boats to hide in. They'd arrived at dawn, when most people aren't that alert anyway. They just want to get properly awake before the inevitable troubles of the day turned up. Their junk didn't look like it meant trouble.

"The captain doesn't recommend using one of the jetties." Said Charlotte.

The captain was a small middle aged Vietnamese man, who obviously knew the local waters like the back of his hand. Ruby wasn't inclined to ignore his advice. He was talking to Charlotte and becoming quite animated.

"He's been here before." Said Charlotte. "Paperwork is always checked and then someone else arrives to check it again. They also search the entire boat."

They were as close to Jingdao Island as they could get, and there was still a good twenty yards of water between them and the beach. Swimming wasn't completely out of the question, but Ruby wanted to avoid getting wet and muddy, if she could.

"And I'm assuming there is a problem with using the dinghies?" She asked.

They had been underneath the dinghies for some of their meals on rainy days. Two large inflatable boats, with serious looking outboard engines, were lashed to the wheelhouse roof.

"They take a long time to get into the water." Replied Charlotte. "And an even longer time to get back out of the water. Plus the outboard engines haven't been tested for nearly three years."

Lau clambered up the inspection ladder and pulled up the edge of the tarpaulin, which covered the boats.

"There are paddles." He said. "Probably better than engines anyway, far quieter."

"Inflatables it is then. Get them into the water." Said Ruby.

She felt him, Ju-Long, he was still waiting and still thinking about the people who were coming for him. He wasn't far way, a mere thirty minute walk, once they were ashore.

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Serge knew he was being a bit of cliché. An ex agent of the DGSE, yearning for the good old days of imperial France and moving to Marseille. At one time it would have been Algeria, but ex-pat French weren't as welcome there as they'd once been. Besides, just about everyone he knew from North Africa, now ran a bar or restaurant in Marseille. He was now officially retired from the security services and living under his own name. That might have been a mistake, there had already been two attempts on his life. As to his relationship with Ruby? The distance to London brought its own problems, but they did share a bed when she visited.

"No Lisa, no!" He yelled. "You have all these gifts, use them. Number four just killed you."

The problem was that Lisa was a natural, a born assassin, agent, body guard, anything she wanted to be with her weapon skills and co-ordination. She didn't need her gifts most of the time, so she ignored them. It was the opposite with most of the other kids, they relied too much on their 'weirding skills,' as Spider had once put it.

"Sorry Serge. Can I do it with live ammo? I'm always better with real bullets, the bangs concentrate the mind."

He knew exactly what she meant. Every bang meant a bullet leaving a gun and the potential for it to kill or maim. That really did make you focus on the present.

"Ok Lisa, but one at a time then. Come on Roger, clear the room."

He had just the two of them now, sometimes three if Olga was around to help. Weapons and Mayhem 101, he tried to give the thirteen a good solid grounding in weapon skills and agent

tracraft. Lisa had been born somewhere in the Caribbean in nineteen twenty five and Roger was from the UK. Born in Leeds in nineteen thirty three, Roger was a rarity, they actually knew his full history since birth. It was crazy really, Kurt and Kallina had trawled the globe for the kids and had never bothered to keep even rudimentary records. That appalled Serge.

“Ok, in your own time Lisa.” He said. “And try not to hit the cameras, they’re expensive.”

He was in the viewing room with Roger, watching Lisa work her way through the killing room in the basement of the house he’d bought. The house was in the middle of nowhere on the road out to Aubagne. The isolated house had a deep wine cellar and Serge had added some sand bags and soundproofing. It was perfect, it was impossible to hear a Kalashnikov on full auto, if you were stood in the driveway. Serge knew, he’d actually tested that one afternoon.

“She’s good.” Said Roger.

“Still not quite as good as Olga.”

“No one is !”

He heard the deference in the boy’s voice, they all practically worshiped Olga. She was their blonde haired Valkyrie, who moved like the wind and never missed. Plus Olga did it all with just normal human skills. She illustrated what he tried to instil in all of them, the need to practise until it all became hard wired into their brains, became a reflex.

“Here we go.” He said. “She’s at number four again.”

He moved the partitions and doors around most days, trying to create an ever changing series of rooms. The bad guys weren’t static either, he’d managed to acquire some state of the art opponents for the thirteen. They only had paint guns, but the robotic arms used heat and movement detectors to spot and fire at anyone in the kill rooms. Suddenly there was the sound of an explosion and two of the screens went dead.

“Damn, more expense.” Said Serge.

He grabbed a fire extinguisher and hit the large red button that turned off everything that might fire at them. Serge found Lisa looking at a destroyed robot opponent and appearing very pleased with herself.

“I did it !” She said. “A controlled and very localised heat effect.”

“Not that controlled Lisa. Grab an extinguisher and help put it out.”

It happened, far too often to really get bent out of shape about it. Lisa had used her gift to destroy a robot and set a few sand bags alight. Good, she was learning. Everything was on camera, everything recorded. He’d run through every move she’d made with her, until she knew exactly what could improve her skills.

“One day I’ll be better than Olga.” Said Lisa.

“Perhaps. Come on both of you. Help me put up two new cameras and Roger can have another try.”

“More than a try !” Said Roger.

“Yeah, sorry Roger..... you’re improving all the time.”

Serge doubted if any of them would be better than Olga, she’d had too much experience in far too many fire fights. She was their Grail in a way, the ultimate goal was to be better in the kill rooms than Olga. Serge still hadn’t quite come to terms with the morality of Olga’s line of work. She sold guns to people who did good things, but she also sold weapons to people who did bad things. It was all a matter of what side you were on of course, one man’s terrorist was another man’s freedom fighter and Olga’s contacts were priceless. Within an hour of arriving in Vietnam, Olga had acquired weapons from a safe source. Serge was learning to turn a blind eye to Olga’s clients who weren’t, what he considered, nice people.

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Ruby was onshore with dry shoes, something to be enjoyed after her boat journeys of two years before. No wet clothes to walk about in, no wet clinging hair. They were all ashore and ready to look for their contact. Olga was staying on the Junk, with her Kalashnikov, ready to give them covering fire. Just in case they were in a hurry and under attack when they left.

"We should be back in less than a day." Ruby told her.

No mention of any contingency if they didn't return. Olga was the one with contacts in Vietnam, she'd find her way home. Two of the crew were joining them, mainly to add credibility. A party of westerners with their guides. Ruby sensed Ju-Long was still there, still waiting, though his thoughts were often strange and disjointed. Dreams, their contact was taking a nap.

"About a mile, that way." She said, pointing along the coast.

They quickly came to a path and then a road. No one, not a solitary person to be seen, it was all a huge anti-climax. Ruby found Ju-Long on a bench near the main Jetty and he was fast asleep.

"He smells." Said Eugenie. "I think he's been here for days."

Operation 'Go West,' didn't seem to be going that well. There were buildings in the distance, but so far Ju-Long was the only living person they'd seen. It was a bit of a relief in many ways, but also quite worrying. Ruby knelt next to the sleeping man and squeezed his arm.

"I'm Ruby Mason." She said. "You're expecting me."

Foxy had given her a long and involved set of code words to use, so that 'his man,' would know it was her. Ruby considered those sorts of things were for real spies, not enthusiastic amateurs.

Besides, who else would be there ?

"Ruby, you're here." He looked at the jetty. "Where is your boat ?"

"Our captain was worried about paperwork checks." She replied. "We're not far away."

His accent was strong, but his English was good. Which was fortuitous, as only Charlotte spoke the local version of Cantonese. Sarah decided which of the thirteen concentrated on the languages of different regions. Being Sarah, she claimed to base it on their auras.

"You have a wise captain." He said. "But not now, no one comes here now. Only the soldiers who guard Factory Number 88."

Eighty eight meant very good luck to the Chinese, there had to be something fairly nasty going on in Factory Number 88.

"We don't have a lot of time." Said Ruby. "Can you take us there now ?"

"My family first, you get my family onto your boat. Then I'll help you."

His mind was broadcasting extreme emotions at high volume, it took all her skill to look through it all and piece the facts together. The smell of decay, the red blotches on his skin. All so easy to put down to a few days of sleeping rough, but they were also symptoms of something far more frightening.

"I'm sorry Ju-Long." She said. "How long do you think you have left."

He pulled at his jacket lapel, revealing a radiation film badge dosimeter. It was black, all of it, as though it had been burned. She'd never seen one that had gone black before.

"About two days." He answered. "I'll take my own life in about two days, while I'm still able."

Ruby knew the answers, but she had to ask the questions.

"And your wife ?"

"A bit longer, perhaps four days. Our children are free of it though. They were far enough away and Mei scrubbed their skin until it bled."

Mei, his wife, huge waves of emotion now and Ruby runs towards a group of bushes, only fifty yards away. Bushes between two utility cupboards, the only real cover for some distance.

“Careful !” Said Ruby. “She has a knife.”

Charlotte was first into the bushes and Ruby could hear her talking. It will be fine now, Charlotte can sooth anyone with just a few words.

“我们在这里帮助您。” – “We are here to help you.”

Lau helps carry their things out of their hideout in the bushes. Mei has the same symptoms of radiation exposure as her husband, but the two children look healthy enough. Scared of the strangers of course, but Charlotte was chatting to them and winning them over. Mei dropped the kitchen knife she’d been carrying and hugged her husband.

“How old are they.” Asked Eugenie.

“They’ll be four next month.” Answered Ju-Long. “Twins, very lucky.”

“Does your wife speak English ?” Asked Ruby.

“Almost none.”

Oh great, things just kept getting better. Foxy hadn’t mentioned a family that needed picking up, it would take a good hour to get back to the Junk and pull the inflatables out of where they’d been hidden. Mei’s head was full of emotions too, pictures of their friends dying and an overwhelming fear for the safety of her twins.

“We’ll take them with us.” Said Ruby. “Then we’ll all go to the boat together.”

“No !” Shouted Ju-Long. “The poison is there, my children will be killed.”

“Fine, we can leave them here for now.” Said Ruby.

“They seemed safe in the bushes.” Added Charlotte.

So far the crew members from the boat hadn’t said anything, but they did seem nervous of the over excited stranger.

“No, we take them to the boat now ! Only I know where you need to go and even the soldiers don’t have the passcodes for the inner doors. You need me !”

She didn’t, not really, he’d just told her everything. His mind had pulled up the passcodes and the direction to Factory 88. It was all too easy! She really did intend to take his family onto the boat, but they could stay where they were for now.

“I know the factory is two miles that way.” She said pointing. “And the codes for the doors, the first is 525463. You have nothing left to bargain with, but I’d still like you to come with us.”

She turned towards Lau.

“Give me the Makarov pistol that Olga gave you.”

“Pistol Ruby..... I have no.....”

“Don’t be stupid Lau, it’s me. Give me the gun or I’ll turn you upside down and shake you, until it falls out of your pocket.”

He pulled the old but reliable gun out of an inside pocket and handed it to her.

“I’m so sorry mother, forgive me.”

Mother, none of them had called her that for over a year. She’d have a longer conversation with him later, if they survived. She checked the magazine was full and handed the gun to Charlotte.

“Why do I..... ?”

“Give it to one of the crew.” Said Ruby. “The brightest one. Tell them to stay with the family and guard the children with their lives. Burn it in deep Charlotte.”

Charlotte spent a while talking to the crew members and then handed the gun to one of them. They seemed to stand a little more upright, like men with a mission. Charlotte was nodding at Ruby.

“That’s it, they’ll die rather than see the kids hurt.”

Next Ju-Long. Ruby's small army was diminishing and they really needed to get to where the device was being kept.

"You heard all that Ju-Long." Said Ruby. "I'd like you to go with us, but the Junk crew guarding your kids is the best deal you're going to get."

"And when you have what you want Ruby Mason?"

"You have my words that your family will leave with us."

Ruby felt doubt in his mind, but he'd obviously made his decision.

"This way." He said. "I know where there's an electric trolley we can use."

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Kallina had found the ruins years before, about fifty kilometres north of Thamud in the Yemen. The area was hot, dusty and there were no proper roads. If God had wanted to give the world an enema, he'd have probably inserted it into Northern Yemen. The area was full of ancient ruins, most of them in far better condition than the one she was using as a prison for Max Krause.

"Have you run out of paper plates?" She asked. "I can get some more."

"No, it always tastes better out of the foil containers."

She'd bought Max a takeaway from his favourite Indian Restaurant near Brick Lane, London. Less than an hour before, she'd queued up, ordered his meal and admired the flock wallpaper, while his meal was prepared. She was used to moving around the globe at will, it was just money that gave her problems. She had taken US dollars instead of pounds. Luckily the guy behind the counter had liked her and her 'stupid tourist,' act. Fifty dollars had bought Max a fairly impressive meal.

"How has your week been Max?"

He just glared at her, two years and he still just wanted to kill her and escape. Kallina had spent the first six months punishing him for his many and varied sins. Just one sign that he might be capable of redemption and she would have moved him to the house in Georgia. It was no good though, he hadn't lost a part of his soul, he'd lost all of it.

"I'm down to the last set of batteries for the radio." He said.

"Did you put it on the list? Otherwise I might forget."

"Yes, six D cell batteries." He replied.

The radio was his one luxury, it could pick up a few English language stations on a good day. The radio had been his reward for not trying to attack her for a month. That had been over a year ago, when she was still trying to correct the problems he had. Didn't the American's call their prisons places of correction? Max really needed a lot of correction.

That had been then and now she simply wanted to keep him away from the rest of the world. Her punishment of him was going to be truly terrible, he was going to share her immortality.

"I can keep you alive forever Max." She'd once told him. "Here, in this stone prison, forever. Only the world ending or the seas rising will save you."

That didn't seem to upset him, there was still the perpetual hatred in his eyes. He'd only ever been given paper plates and plastic cutlery, yet he'd tried to attack her with plastic knives. He'd even tried to attack poor Constanze once, so Kallina had stopped bringing her. That had been the night she'd thrown him against the wall and broken several of his ribs.

"Don't worry Max, I won't let you die, ever." She'd told him. "Two hundred years and you'll cease to remember things in their proper order and you'll go very deaf. Parts of human bodies don't replace Max, you wouldn't believe the number of Cataract operations I've had over the years. Ears too Max, bits wear out and need replacing."

She'd prodded his broken ribs and made him scream.

“Three or four hundred years and you’ll be exactly like me !”

There had been a recognition between them that night, of an almost a kindred spirit. They both realised how damaged the other was, but Kallina was the one in control. She’d ceased to torture or beat him and tried to make his prison relatively comfortable. Ruby knew she had Max of course, the monster who’d tried several times to kill the children. Ruby had to know where Max was being kept, but had never mentioned him in two years.

“Could I have a pet of some kind ?” He asked.

“You attacked Constanze.” She replied. “I’ll bring you a bird in a cage, but if you kill it..... I’ll use my knives on you again !”

Fear in his eyes now, he remembered the six month when she’d tried to bring him closer to God, through hundreds of small painful cuts. Kallina’s religious leanings covered everything from Old Testament Christianity to Scientology and her mind mixed it all into one large homogenous mush. Some days she was even a fundamentalist atheist. Her one enduring faith was that people could be changed in you beat them into changing. It didn’t surprise her that Ruby didn’t agree with that view. “I promise to look after it.”

“Fine, put a bird in a cage on the list Max and bird food. Everything on the list Max, or I’ll forget to bring it.”

The ancient buildings north of Thamud had collapsed hundreds of years ago, maybe thousands, leaving just a cellar, buried beneath tons of stone blocks. Wind and rain erosion had turned the pile of rocks into what looked like a natural spur of rock. He had daylight, two of his rooms had gaps between the stones, three inches wide in places. Kallina had used the cellar to store equipment, but it also made a perfect jail.

“Do you ever see anyone out there ?” She asked, looking through the gap in the stones.

“Just a man with some goats.” He answered. “A long way off though.”

Probably the truth, Kallina had found traces of a camp fire about a kilometre to the west. Few people came to that part of the Yemen and they were unlikely to dig a crazy man out of a hole in the ground. The locals would think the voice was a Jinn and run away, not stopping until they reached Aden. She waited for him to finish his list, he was becoming a very expensive house guest. Three new shirts, two pairs of black jeans, trainers. The list went on and on, covering all his favourite foods to a tube of toothpaste. She’d drawn the line at paying hundreds of dollars for his chemical toilets. Kallina stole them, entire toilets, from building wholesalers and dumped the old ones out in the ocean.

“Is she still alive ?” He asked.

“Ruby you mean ?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, she’s doing well and the children are growing up.”

“You’re all monsters ! Abominations !” He yelled.

Once she’d have cut him and then healed the wounds to cut him again. Now she sat at the table with his chessboard and gave herself the black pieces.

“Your turn to start.” She said.

He looked like everyone’s favourite old uncle, as he used his cane to limp over to the table. He wasn’t harmless though, he’d boasted of killing two snakes with his cane. Several desert creatures had tried to move in with him and none of them survived. Max sat opposite her and actually smiled. “I might win this time.”

He might be right, he was a good player. Kallina knew with certainty that no matter what. Max would have to remain in his prison forever.

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Ju-Long was driving the electric trolley. It looked like an oversized milk float and was obviously used to move equipment around the science park. It was noisy, very noisy.

“Everyone here is used to the noise, they hear it all day.” Ju-Long had told them.

It rattled and clanged its way over the blocks the road was made of and had a special banging sound it seemed to save for going up and down ramps. They were all looking worried.

“Hardly sneaking up on them.” Said Charlotte.

“Trust me, they’ll ignore us.” Said Ju-Long.

The top speed seemed to be around thirty, but they were keeping to about twenty. At top speed, the trolley made enough noise to deafen them all. It was hardly a high speed assault on Factory Number 88, but it was still much faster than walking. The contraption slowed and came to a halt.

“There.” Ju-Long was pointing at a warehouse fifty yards away. “We should walk now.”

Ruby had known he’d be useful. He took them between buildings and through a door, into an empty warehouse, with windows that faced Factory 88. They crouched low, peering through the grubby windows. There only seemed to be two guards, both lounging on chairs by the factory’s main doors.

“Poor discipline.” Said Lau.

“No one wants to be here.” Replied Ju-Long. “Military service is compulsory, but they’d rather be anywhere but here.”

He looked behind him at the empty warehouse.

“This area was full of paint and all the other buildings were full.” He said. “Now everything has been taken away by soldiers, in case the device poisons us again.”

Ruby was surprised that their new friend hadn’t mentioned their lack of weapons, or even that they didn’t exactly look like a Special Forces team. Ju-Long hadn’t even commented on her giving the crew of the Junk, their only firearm. It was either the natural politeness of the Chinese, or Foxy had told him the rescue team was likely to be a little.... Unorthodox.

“How many guards are there ?” Ruby asked.

“Between eight and twelve.” Answered Ju-Long. “They don’t expect to be attacked and rarely bother to carry their weapons. Some of them even have the first signs of radiation poisoning.”

“Sounds almost too easy.” Said Eugenie.

“The main military base for the area is only five miles away.” Said Ju-Long. “There are over three hundred soldiers there.”

“Three hundred to guard a science park ?!”

“But it isn’t just a science park Ruby ! And remember that China has the largest standing army in the world, about two and a half million soldiers.”

Ju-long was grinning at her.

“Sending three hundred here is three hundred less to keep busy.”

Ruby had to smile. Spider had told her that the British army still gave bored soldiers a paint brush and a bucket of whitewash.

“With instructions to whitewash anything that doesn’t move.” He’d told her. “Motto of the army... if it moves salute it, if it doesn’t..... Paint it.”

“How well armed are they ?” Asked Lau. “Do they have helicopters ?”

“No helicopters, but they do have a tank. A new one, very fast and it has a flamethrower.”

“For real ! A tank ?” Asked Eugenie.

“Oh yes, it’s real. You’ll see it if the guards here alert their base.”

Ruby sat with her back to the wall and did a quick calculation. The army were conscripts, who’d need to be assembled and put into trucks, maybe one or two APCs. The tank wouldn’t rush on ahead, it would give cover to the trucks. Five miles away, say ten to fifteen minutes to drive over the local roads. She looked straight at Charlotte.

“We might get forty minutes to be long gone.” She said. “If not, you’ll have to take care of the tank.”

“I’ve only done it twice for real.” Said Charlotte. “And they were old trucks, not tanks.”

“You’ll have to do it Charlotte. Kallina told you ! What is a tank ?”

“Please Ruby.” Charlotte pleaded. “I’m not ready.”

“No one ever is..... what is a tank ?”

“A tank is metal coffin for three or four soldiers Ruby.”

“Good. If it comes, you’ll need to bring the thunder down..... ok ?”

“Ok.”

It was tough love, but Kallina was right. Charlotte needed to be pushed into using her gifts to the full. She got up, being careful to make sure she wasn’t seen through the windows.

“I take it these soldiers still know and trust you ?” She asked Ju-Long.

“Yes, they all know I’m the Senior Manager of Level 4.”

“Fine. Introduce Charlotte as a lost tourist and let her do her thing.”

“And me.” Said Eugenie.

She was pouting, so Ruby held her hand.

“Don’t worry. You’ll all have plenty to do today.”

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Charlotte was the most skilled at using her empath skills. Ruby might be able to get a table in the busiest restaurant, but only Charlotte could get them to move a celebrity, so that she could have the best table. She oozed positive empathy, waves of it went before her and the entire guard, all ten of them, were hers within minutes.

“They’ll fight for us.” Said Charlotte. “But most of them have muscle tremors and a fever. They know they’ve been left here to die.”

“They won’t even slow down a concerted attack.” Added Lau.

They were in the warm and sticky guard room, with no fans or windows. There were several monitors showing the six lower levels and lots of clipboards hanging on hooks. Ju-Long was examining one of the clipboards.

“Background radiation has dropped off rapidly.” He said. “We’ll be fine if we don’t spend too long down there..... Or you will be.”

Ruby didn’t need reminding that Ju-Long was dying. He’d started coughing and the skin blemishes were becoming redder, much more livid looking. Lau had found a rack full of weapons, though he hadn’t picked one up yet. He was fondling a Chinese QBZ-95 assault rifle, the way most people fondle their pets.

“Please Ruby, may I ? I am fully trained in its use.”

“Alright Lau. Anyone else who can use a weapon can take one too.... But only if you want to.”

Eugenie was the only one to join Lau, by picking a QBZ-95 off the rack. Lau also found an ammunition bag full of spare clips and put it over his shoulder.

“No sightseeing.” Said Ruby. “Ju-Long leads and we get down to level 4, as quickly as we can.”

The ground floor consisted of a few offices and a large stores area. They had to move between fork lift trucks that had been abandoned in inconvenient places. Once neat piles of tins had been knocked over and there was even a body near the doors to the stairs.

"This is inexcusable." Said Ju-Long. "The guards should have at least put her in a body bag."

The body was barely recognisable as female, decay seemed quite advanced. Ruby had no idea when the radiation event had happened, but it had to have been at least two weeks before. Ju-Long pressed the code for the door and they descended to level 1.

"Fabrication on this level." Said Ju-Long. "Working in titanium, trying to build a vessel to carry the device."

Another keypad and there are two bodies just inside the doors. The ventilation system was off, probably had been off since the criticality event. The entire level stank of death, and Ju-Long picked up his pace.

"Sorry." Said Ruby. "You must have known these people."

"My cousin worked on this level. His body will be somewhere here."

There were lots of doors, all requiring the same door code, over and over again. It was mindless bureaucracy at its worst and it was slowing them down. Everyone seemed to have been working on titanium panels for some kind of enclosure for the device. Through another door and down the stairs to level 2.

'Power and Information Technology.'

'Authorised personnel only.'

It said on the doors, which were reinforced with metal struts. Without Ju-Long it might have taken them a long time to get past the doors. He entered the code and they were into a maze of corridors.

"Factory 88 has its own power supply and server network." Said Ju-Long.

The CIA or MI6 would have offered a lot to have been given an opportunity to look over the information on those servers. Ruby just wanted to get past it all on down to level 4. Ju-Long was dying and their slowest walker, so any idea of jogging along the corridors was out of the question.

More bodies, some wearing Hazmat suits. One corridor intersection had a cluster of bodies, all killed by automatic weapons fire. No time to wonder about why, they picked their way over and round the bodies and carried on to the stairs leading down.

'Level 3 – Logistics and Testing.'

The sign meant nothing to Ruby and Ju-Long hadn't felt the need to give any more information. Yet more bodies and it was getting warmer. They disturbed something moving near to one of the bodies and Lau fired, killing at least three large brown rats.

"No !" Shouted Ju-Long. "Leave them to their feast. There are gunfire detectors on the next level down."

A different and more complex passcode on the door to the stairs and yet another reinforced door to get into level 4.

'Level 4 – Hangar.'

"No need for any warnings about access." Said Ju-Long. "Only those with top level security can get this far."

The hangar was huge and it contained a single aircraft under construction.

"I wasn't concentrating." Ruby said to Ju-Long. "When you said vessel to carry the device, I didn't have this in mind."

The aircraft was some way below them, almost in a pit. They began to descend the stairs to get down to it.

“Everyone constructs prototypes underground now.” Said Ju-Long. “Away from prying eyes. The rails take it into an elevator that lifts it to the surface. Testing is only done on dark moonless nights.”

“Like an aircraft carrier.” Said Lau.

“Yes, but we can lift far heavier craft.”

“It’s..... beautiful !” Exclaimed Eugenie.

It was beautiful. The front looked like an American stealth bomber, but the lines were much more graceful. There were similarities to some of the new Russian fighters, but the rear of the craft was smooth. It was going to use the device to throw itself through the air at many times the speed of sound. It was pure genius, but insane at the same time.

“We could only ever build one.” Said Ju-Long. “But imagine the kudos for China though, when it flies at the major air shows around the world. It has a code name, but we call it the Jingdao Dragon.”

A dragon yes, Ruby could see that in the way the front lifted up slightly from the rest of the craft. It was all built of unpainted titanium and it shone under the rows of lighting. Only the bodies stopped it being a really glorious looking craft. The dead littered the ground all over the floor of the construction pit.

“Has it flown ?” Ruby asked.

“No, we tested the output from the device several times, but when we put it under load.....there was the criticality accident.”

They were next to the aircraft now and it was huge, nearly the size of an Airbus A380, but with short stubby wings. Ruby touched the fuselage and felt a slight vibration.

“The device is still operating.” She said.

“It’s been operating all the time.” Said Ju-Long. “It was operating when they found it a mile beneath the ground at Baotou.”

A Karakum generator, probably left running for over a million years. They’d been lucky, it might have exploded and taken most of South East China with it.

“I’ll take the inspection covers off Ruby, so you can examine it properly.”

Ruby looked into the mind of the dying scientist and realised Foxy’s people in London had told Ju-Long that Ruby was coming to sort things out. He thought of her as the expert on such matters. Expert ! Kallina had told her to put a few sticks of TNT under anything she found and run.

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