

Ruby 2

Chapter 9 – My Enemy’s Enemy

“Sophie was still clinging to the Bazooka, which was as long as she was tall and probably weighed as much as she did.”

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A week after seeing Foxy, Ruby was sat next to Sarah on an Aeroflot flight from Moscow to Vladivostok. The Russian airline was infamous for flying some fairly geriatric jets, but they were in a modern Airbus. Visas had been the problem, even the two day special business visa turnaround, had taken five days. It seemed that Putin might be encouraging foreign investment, but the bureaucracy still felt like wading through treacle. Olga had wanted a one night stopover in Moscow, to meet some of her contacts. That had actually been a welcome hold up, they had a chance to stay in a decent hotel and play tourist for a night. Sarah was currently sipping a perfectly chilled glass of wine. “Heaven,” she said, “we should travel like this all the time.”

“Make the most of it. We’ll be travelling on a rattily old train for days.”

“Then I shall have to really enjoy Vladivostok.”

Ruby inwardly cringed. Sarah enjoying herself could sometimes be dangerous and always memorable. They’d once needed to track her right across Baku, in the middle of the night. She couldn’t even be starved of money, to make her behave. Sarah now had her own credit cards. Ruby decided that if she couldn’t stop Sarah becoming slightly feral, she might as well join her.

“Can you get another bottle of wine ?” She asked

“No problem Ruby. Do you want the same stuff ?”

Ruby nodded and Sarah waved at one of the cabin staff. Not everyone in business class was getting the same good service. There was none of Ruby’s empathic skills involved, just Sarah’s fluent Russian. Plus lies of course, Sarah could cook up a plausible life history in seconds. Her family were all Russian, with links to Putin himself. She was good, Ruby was almost tempted to believe some of it. The cabin crew bought it completely and were treating Sarah like visiting royalty.

“Here’s to five days in Vladivostok.” Said Sarah.

They clinked glasses and avoided even smiling at Charlotte or Eugenie, sitting just three rows behind. Ruby would be on a Russian intelligence list of some kind, probably several. Sarah would be on there with her, most likely with террористический after their names, ‘Terrorist.’

“They’ll almost certainly grant you a visas and let you in.” Foxy had told her. “But you’ll be followed everywhere and getting out could be fun.”

Ruby had her own way of leaving Russia, with the help of Olga and her contacts. Murad was on their flight, further back, right up against the curtain to coach class. Olga was taking Sophie and Lau with her, travelling out a day later to meet up in Vladivostok. It made sense to take different planes, for all sorts of reasons.

“We’ll be harder to spot and of course..... Planes do have accidents.” She’d told them.

Many corporations split their key people between different planes, it was just being sensible. There was also the chance that a group of police with automatic weapons, might be waiting for her and Sarah in the arrivals lounge. Unlikely though and Ruby had no idea how she’d react if it happened. Fight her way out, create a massive explosion and vanish in the confusion ? It was simply safer to keep the thirteen and their untainted passports, well away from the old hands, who’d been to Karakum. The movie started, which was in Russian, with no subtitles.

“Ahhh, this is the Aeroflot I was expecting.” Said Ruby.

Sarah unplugged her earphones and pushed her seat back a bit.

“It’s a romance.” Said Sarah. “I’m going to get some sleep. How long until we land?”

“Another four and a half hours.”

“Crap ! I’ll get us another two bottles of wine.”

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Max had hoped to find a settlement, but he found a group of men with rifles and a bad attitude. He knew a little Arabic, but they were shouting at him in something much more nasal. He stopped walking and put his hands up, the universal sign that you’re admitting to being outgunned. Max tried a few words in his poor Arabic.

“I have no weapons.” He said. “I’m lost.”

Five of them, all on foot and all watching him and then the sky. They’d been attacked by someone, or were expecting to be attacked.

“صديق.” “Friend !” He said, pointing at himself.

It was a lie of course, he had no idea who they were, much less if they were people he’d even like, let alone be friends with. They were a mystery in a part of the world where everyone seemed to view everyone else as a threat. They weren’t keen on moving too close though, one gestured at the make shift packs over his shoulders.

“Just food.” Said Max. “You’re welcome to share it.”

He wanted to add that they’d soon become sick of cold baked beans, but didn’t know the right Arabic words. Max put all his packs on the ground and undid one, spilling several small tins of Heinz Beans with Sausages, over the ground.

“American !” One of them shouted.

English writing on the tins, which meant American to them. Americans, the cause of everything bad, the one true enemy of everyone in Yemen. The problem was there didn’t seem to be a clear leader among them, no one for Max to win over. Max shook his head and smiled, a lot.

“Just food.” He said. “No weapons.”

They were looking at his rations rather nervously, he was a problem for them. There was only one sure way to deal with that problem. Two of them nodded at each other and raised their rifles. Max didn’t try to run, there was nowhere to go. He’d told himself he might die in that awful desert and his prediction was coming true. He lowered his arms though and stopped smiling.

“I don’t even know who you fuckers are !” He yelled, in English.

“They’re Maqil.” Said Baba Yaga. “A Bedouin tribe.”

One moment she was next to him, the next she was stood beside one on the Maqil. He’d seen her do it to his men, get amongst them and tear them to pieces. There was no subtlety with Baba Yaga, she was like a biblical avenging angel. She tore the man’s right arm off and left him screaming.

His would be killers had lost all interest in him, they were firing everything they had at Baba Yaga.

“Jinn !” One yelled.

Max had no weapons and no real inclination to join the fight. Baba Yaga would win of course, she was insane and practically indestructible. It wasn’t quite lunchtime, but Max sat cross legged on the sand and opened a tin of pilchards. They were something special, Kallina had only ever bought him about five tins. They’d been one of her whims, never repeated. That tin of pilchards was his reward for making it to a settlement, which he had, in a way. Cold pilchard was fairly disgusting, but far nicer than yet another tin of cold beans.

Baba Yaga worked to a pattern. She broke arms or simply ripped them off, to render her target harmless. Once all of them were harmless, she killed them. She obviously enjoyed her work, taking her time over it and coating the desert in their blood. Max remembered reading that Caligula had liked his victims to die slowly. He'd wanted them to feel they were dying and Baba Yaga seemed to be of the same mind. Eventually she became Kallina again, but her clothes were still covered in warm blood. She sat opposite him, three feet away, her legs folded under her.

"Thank you." He said. "Would you like some beans?"

"No. Some water would be nice."

He opened another pack and handed her a large bottle of Volvic.

"Sometimes I'm glad you're a crazy homicidal bitch."

She laughed, between drinking large amounts of water.

"See what I've seen, experience what I've experienced Max and you'd be just as crazy."

He finished his beans and washed it down with a can of Coke, another one of his special little luxuries.

"Don't put me back in that hole in the ground." He said. "Leave me here, send me to meet my maker. Anything but that place."

"Actually Max." She said. "I have a proposition to put to you."

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The strange thing was, that George had immense wealth and a fairly famous face. Newsnight were always trying to get him on their show, the famous owner of The Polandrous Foundation. Most of the time they just wanted to portray him as the unacceptable face of capitalism and poke him with sticks, but fame is fame. So why did he only feel truly content when he was helping Ruby?

"We had a follow up call on Sarah's visa application." Said Penny.

George liked a chance to become involved in Ruby's unusual activities, but lying to the Chinese visa people might well have consequences.

"Our freelance language consultant." He replied. "I hope they received a positive answer?"

"Yes, I had our lawyers confirm everything. Though there might be a problem."

Penny sat herself down, they'd known each other long enough for her not to need an invitation.

"We put the visa applications through several different subsidiaries." She added. "All legitimate and above board, but if the Chinese decide to dig a little....."

"They'll find it all links back to The Polandrous Foundation." He said.

"The lawyer said we could issue disclaimers for Sarah and Olga. Make a big thing about them being freelance and therefore out of our control. Just in case something goes wrong George."

Tits up or pear shaped, as Ruby referred to matters that went wrong. George had been contemplating opening an office in Shanghai. Now he was visualising that idea going well and truly tits up.

"No. Keep pushing all enquiries to the lawyers and no disclaimers. Any queries on the kids visas?"

"Not so far, just Sarah Simmons. As you know, the Russians also queried her visa application."

"Ruby's going to stir up a lot of trouble again Penny."

His PA had done a good job the last time Ruby had gone rogue for a while. Penny had her rewards, a corner office with a decent view of London and a company car. She was nodding at him.

"The things that matter to us tend to come with consequences." He said. "Only the things that don't really matter, come worry free. Is Terry still safe?"

"Yes, still living with the academic and her family in Baishan." Answered Penny. "We get almost daily emails via her college server, all coded and looking fairly innocuous."

The academic was sending the emails to the educational arm of Polandrous, all easily traced back to them, when it hit the fan. Ruby was going to cost him the chance of investing in Shanghai, but she was worth it.

“At least she’s not causing mayhem in Russia.” He said. “Or at least I hope she isn’t.”

“I sent the money she wanted to Dalnevostochnyy Bank in Vladivostok.”

“Good, Olga will be able to buy her toys.”

He got up and poured Penny a cup of coffee from his personal machine. That too had become part of their newfound friendship, after Ruby’s last escapade.

“We need to start insulating the Foundation from any fallout in China.” He said. “Use a team you can trust and do it quietly and carefully. Begin to sell everything over there that isn’t essential.”

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Spider had been to see another three ex call girls, or escorts as they preferred to be known. All of them had been friendly and helpful, yet unable to provide any useful information. More background on Rob Newsmith and his sexual appetites, but only what was already known. He’d nearly caused serious harm to another girl. She hadn’t complained of course, complaining was likely to mean going to the bottom of the list for future bookings. Spider was beginning to dislike Aunty Silvia and her business practises. He’d taken them out to Epping Forest, to see the scene of the crime, in the hopes of getting a fresh perspective on the matter. Mary wasn’t with them, it was something she couldn’t face. No Mary and his face still hurt like hell, it looked set to be one of those days.

“Well ?” Asked Spider. “Are your super senses all a tingle ?”

Monique just sighed at him, but Fabio seemed to be quite excited about something.

“To your left a bit Spider, between the two silver birch trees.” He said.

Fabio was holding one of their files, Spider had insisted on everything being printed out and neatly filed away in manilla coloured files.

“No weirding skills.” Said Fabio. “The trees are in the original photographs.”

Spider checked and Natalie’s bloody remains had been found between the two trees. There was no mistaking the slight twist in the trunk of one silver birch. George had obtained the original police files from someone, complete with the autopsy report and scene of crime photos. Monique was kneeling right there, on the spot where Natalie had been dumped.

“Not sure what you were expecting Spider.” She said. “But it’s been too long for any residual thoughts to still be here.”

“Just think.” Said Spider. “Put yourself here that night. What mistakes did they make, these three scared and desperate men ? Who might have seen them ? Anything !”

Spider knelt near to Monique and ran his hand through the dead leaves. The police had been thorough at the time and they’d found nothing.

“Too far to their car.” Said Fabio. “They picked a lonely spot, but the nearest place to park is a long way off. Past two large ponds and across or round, a fair sized clearing.”

“A mistake.” Added Monique.

“It’s a start.” Said Spider. “Not too many kids out fishing for Sticklebacks in the middle of the night, but other people visit the ponds at night.”

“The police interviewed a few late night dog walkers.” Said Fabio. “All elderly, they’re probably dead by now.”

“Maybe not Fabio. Little old ladies are made to last.” Said Spider. “We’ll walk to the car park, to get a feel for the place and then we’ll see if any of the insomniac dog walkers are still breathing.”

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Kallina had found some chocolate in the rations of the men she'd just killed. Cadbury's in an Arabic wrapper, she gave half to Max.

"I can take you to London Max, help you find somewhere to live." She said. "Even help you find some well-paid work."

Max didn't look like the man who'd kept coming after Ruby, following her halfway across the globe. He looked tired and finished, apart from a slight twinkle in his eyes. He'd be the old Max again, he just needed some food that wasn't out of tins and a change of clothes. Maybe a subscription to a decent gym too.

"But there's something you need in return." He replied.

How to put it to him? She'd talked it over at length with Ruby and still didn't know whether Max would bite. He was half crazy, he might choose to carry on walking across the desert to Oman. She decided to come straight out with it.

"I want to hire you Max, to watch Ruby's back and protect those she cares about. Quietly and unseen, I want you to be her guardian angel in London."

Max laughed for a while, but he didn't collect his things up and begin trudging north. There was nothing there anyway, just mile upon mile of barren sand and rocks.

"So Kallina, what went wrong? Why do you need me?"

"They all built lives Max, put down roots. You know how that can work out. There is a reason our kind stay in the shadows."

"Something found them?" He asked.

"The State Security Department of North Korea seems to have been following Ruby for months and a PI has been looking into Sarah. Everyone was so busy looking at the big picture, that they failed to see what was going on, right in their own backyard."

Max dug out a small tin of pineapple chunks from his homemade packs and began to eat them. That was the moment she realised he was going to say yes. There'd be haggling and he'd play hard to get, but he'd say yes.

"It happens." He said. "So what would be my role? I'm sure if you'd wanted this PI killed and his home burned to the ground, you'd have done it yourself."

Kallina felt her left eye twitch and Max was smiling at her. There had been that suggestion, made by her and Ruby had stopped her.

"He's just a private investigator doing his job Kallina. Besides, people will begin looking into his recent cases and our problem might escalate."

Max knew Kallina's way of sorting out problems, all too well.

"Stop him Max, by legal means if you can." She said. "Buy him off, he's a bent copper who retired just ahead of being prosecuted."

"And the Koreans?"

"Same as any other threat Max. Neutralise it and dispose of the evidence."

He finished the pineapple chunks. Throwing the empty tin far into the desert.

"Fine." He said. "I'll be your guy in London, Ruby's very own fairy godmother. But I hire who I want and handle things my way, ok?"

For a guy who'd been thrown into a hole in the ground for two years, Max was recovering fast.

"No problem with that. I just need your word that you will never again try to harm Ruby, her friends or the kids."

"I don't want to harm anyone and that's your doing Kallina. I don't want to become the male equivalent of Baba Yaga."

In her opinion he was misjudging her, everyone did. No one could walk in her shoes and relive the last three of four hundred years, so how could they judge her? No good telling him that though. "Say it then." She said. "Give me your word, as a warrior."

He gave a long weary sigh.

"Fair enough. I Max Krause, ex CIA, ex just about everything else. Do swear that I will never harm Ruby Mason, her friends, or the odd alien kids. I will also do my best to protect them all from harm."

He grinned at her.

"That do?"

"That will do very nicely. You know what will happen if you break that vow."

"Yes, you'll spend a long time cutting lumps out of me."

Kallina stood and watched a small propeller plane approach from the North West. Probably a government spotter plane, looking for the men she'd killed.

"Grab what you want to take Max." She said. "We're going to London."

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Spider had a lucky break, just when he really needed one. Four out of the five people questioned by the police were dead and buried. In one case, the house they'd lived in was no longer there. Pulled down as part of a redevelopment and replaced by a hideous shopping precinct.

"It still says Norris on the doorbell." Said Fabio.

Ivy Norris had been interviewed three times by the police. She'd been having a few personal problems at the time, though the police file didn't give details. Whatever was keeping Ivy awake, had led to her walking her dog through Epping Forest, between three and four am most nights. Why see her three times? Spider was curious. He pressed the doorbell.

"Mrs Ivy Norris?" He asked.

"Yes."

She had a shock of white hair now and a slight smell of cats wafted out of her front door. Her eyes were alert though, as she looked over the three people on her doorstep. He'd told the ex-escorts who he was and about his links to Auntie Silvia. That wouldn't do for Ivy though; he pulled a business card out his wallet.

'R Bailey – Private Investigations.' It said and gave his phone number.'

"Well, you'd better come inside then." Said Ivy.

Far too easy, he wanted to give her a lecture on letting strangers into her house. Maybe as they left though and she'd told them all she knew. The fine for being an unlicensed PI was about five grand, but she didn't seem the sort to check him out with the police. Ivy took them through into the kitchen and motioned for them to sit at her table. Almost immediately a large black and white cat, leapt onto Fabio's lap. Two other cats, kept their distance and remained sat on the windowsill.

"Don't worry." Said Ivy. "Suki doesn't scratch or bite."

She made tea without asking if anyone wanted any, watching Spider as he put the police file on her kitchen table. It would add authenticity to him being a PI, having a large file with police reports inside.

"I see you used to be a dog owner." He said.

"Bill was the dog person and he's gone now. Not dead, he ran off with my best friend."

She was looking at the pictures in his file, while pouring boiling water into a large tea pot.

"You're not here about that poor girl in the forest are you?" She asked. "That was years ago, when I was having my troubles with Bill."

"Her family have hired us to review the case." Said Spider.

"A wealthy aunt." Added Monique.

Tea arrived in mugs and a plate of biscuits. Ivy sat herself at the head of the table and looked at Spider.

"I told the police at the time. I saw nothing unusual."

Monique actually kicked his foot under the table. She was picking up something from the elderly cat lover.

"The police came back to see you." He said.

Spider made a point of moving the file in front of him.

"Three interviews in total. That's odd for a witness who saw nothing." He added.

Ivy was agitated, he didn't need special gifts to see that.

"That was Bill, telling them I'd come home upset that morning. All nonsense, he enjoyed causing trouble."

Monique tapped his ankle with her foot again.

"We're not the police." Said Spider. "Your name won't be given to anyone and you won't be called as a witness. But we need to know what you saw Ivy."

"You can trust us." Added Monique.

It was that smile, the one Ruby used to make strangers more amenable to her wishes. Monique wasn't as good as most of the thirteen, but Ivy was looking happier.

"I won't be in trouble with the police?" Asked Ivy. "You promise."

"We promise." Said Monique.

Spider quietly clicked his phone onto record, knowing that Ivy would tell Monique everything.

"I had enough trouble with him, without looking for more." She said.

"Men can be bastards." Said Monique.

"With my best friend of all people! I just didn't want, couldn't cope with the thought of being a witness, having the world know my business. They would of course, once it was all in the papers. He's famous now, I've seen him on TV and the others. Fancy people like that running the country."

"What did you see Ivy?" Prompted Spider.

"The three of them, carrying something wrapped up in a tarpaulin cover. Making enough noise to wake the dead and arguing with each other. I'm just surprised that no one else saw them."

"So you followed them?" Asked Fabio.

Ivy liked biscuits, she was nibbling at her fourth digestive, maybe her fifth.

"Martin was quite old, our dog. A cat could walk past his nose and he wouldn't bark. Plus with all the noise they were making..... Yes I followed them and heard the other two blaming Newsmith for killing her. They carried her for over a mile before unrolling the tarpaulin and dumping the poor thing."

"When did you realise they had a woman's body in the tarpaulin?" Asked Monique.

Ivy was more open with Monique, but she also looked slightly ashamed.

"It's never that dark in the forest. Some street lights are turned off now, but then they were left on all night. There's always a bit of a glow in the sky and one of them kept using a flashlight. I saw her skin as they poured her out of the tarpaulin. Hair too, long shiny hair. I knew then, that it wasn't a prank or anything. They really had killed a woman."

"Tell us everything, all of it Ivy." Said Monique.

"I went over to her, after they'd gone. She must have been pretty before he'd used a hammer on her face. She smelt of blood and expensive perfume."

Spider had been onto Google and printed a recent picture of each of the men involved. He placed them next to her tea cup.

“Are these the men who dumped the body ?”

“Yes, that’s them. I still get nightmares about them giggling, as they went back to their car.”

“Who used the hammer on her face ?” Asked Monique.

Ivy stabbed her finger at the picture of Rob Newsmith.

“Him, that bastard.”

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One advantage of waiting for a week for visas, was the time it gave to choose a hotel. There were lots of good hotels in Vladivostok, but for Ruby it had to be the five star Hyundai Hotel. A modern business hotel, with all the pampering that comes with five stars. There was even a decent view from her hotel window. Sarah especially appreciated the extras that a decent hotel could offer.

“How did we cross half the globe without a sauna ?” She asked.

Olga had checked in that morning, the entire Korean invasion team was in Russia. Eight of them including Murad, who’d begged to be allowed to be part of the group.

“You have to promise to behave.” Said Ruby. “We can’t risk trouble with the local police.”

“Ok Ruby, you’ve told me a dozen times.”

“And I’ll tell you another dozen times Sarah. No going out to buy drugs and no bringing strange men back to the hotel.”

“Sometimes Ruby Mason, you sound just like my mother !”

It wasn’t really a bad argument, it was just the way she communicated with Sarah. Her best friend was a complete screw up, who often needed protecting from herself.

“Can I come with you ?” Asked Sarah.

“Yes, I’m hoping everyone comes along. No point in Olga going shopping, if people don’t get a choice.”

“Are we going to hire a vehicle ?” Asked Sarah.

“Maybe, not today though. We’ll get two taxis.”

Ruby collected Charlotte and Eugenie on the way and then waited in reception for the others. By the time the taxis arrived, everyone was ready to leave. The local taxis charged a flat rate by the hour, which meant they didn’t mind waiting. Everyone wanted to travel with Ruby, so she had to allocate who went where.

“Sometimes.” She muttered to Sarah. “It’s like organising a school outing.”

The city wasn’t large and the roads were relatively clear. According to Olga, the local always moaned about traffic jams, as did the inhabitants of most cities. Their driver took the A-379, heading north and then east. Eventually their taxi reached the road junction Olga had given the driver as their destination and they were left to wait for the second taxi.

“Not worth hiring or buying.” Said Olga. “We’ll be leaving in a few days.”

They should have hired cars, the second taxi took another twenty minutes to show up. The driver spoke poor Russian and didn’t know the city that well. Olga muttered at him and called him a few names, but paid him the amount he asked for.

“All taxi drivers are crook, everywhere.” She said.

Olga was in her element now, walking them along a street in a city she’d called home for many years. Ruby just let her talk, happy that everyone had made it to Russia in one piece. Olga’s people in Vladivostok had actually staged a hostile takeover, stealing her best clients and setting up on their

own. Strangely Olga showed no signs of holding that against them and was quite happy to purchase weapons and equipment from them.

“These guys have everything Ruby, even the latest American weapons.”

It was a company that sold paper products, there was even a car park full of delivery vans. Down a few stairs and through a few doors though, was where the serious money was made. Ruby heard Lau gasp as they entered the large open plan warehouse.

“Impressed ?” Asked Olga. “It’s like Disneyland for grownups.”

“Bad grownups.” Added Charlotte.

It was larger than several superstores that Ruby had visited. Proper shelving lined up along wide aisles. Instead of food and clothing, the shelves were full of weapons, ammunition and all the other toys of warfare. A man was approaching her who could have been a brother to Jurgis, the resemblance was uncanny and unsettling.

“Welcome to Ivan’s.” He said. “You must be Ruby.”

“This is Ivan.” Said Olga.

Trust was fine up to a point. Olga hadn’t let her enter Ivan’s emporium of all things lethal, without giving her a bit of background. Ivan was paying a kickback to the authorities, he had to, to keep open for business. Ruby was almost certain to have been followed to Ivan’s, but that didn’t matter. He also sold the occasional snippet of information. That did matter ! So, Ivan would know her name, but nothing about her final destination. Olga had already seeded him with a pile of nonsense about industrial espionage in China.

“Hello Ivan.” Said Ruby. “I’m hoping you have everything we need.”

“If you can’t see it on the shelves, come and find me.”

It was self-service, apart from the ammunition, for obvious reasons. Olga knew the place well and grabbed a golf cart linked to a trolley, which performed the role of supermarket trolley.

“This was all yours once Olga ?”

“It was small then and I didn’t have the time to give it the attention it deserved.” Replied Olga. “I hate to say it, but Ivan runs the place far better than I could.”

“His real name is Alexandru.” Said Charlotte.

Olga seemed amused by that revelation.

“Thank you Charlotte.” She said. “That piece of information might get us a little extra discount.

Come on then people..... let’s buy some big mean weapons !”

Ruby stood for a while, watching the thirteen pick up various assault rifles and ask Olga about their choice. Olga would soon be driven crazy and buy them a Kalashnikov each, or maybe something made by ArmaLite. Olga knew her weapons, whatever she chose would get the job done. Sophie had found a large Russian bazooka.

“No Sophie, that’s just not practical.” Said Olga.

Ruby chuckled and browsed the aisles for communicators and battlefield med kits. Sarah stayed with her, despite looking rather longingly at a shelf full of large handguns.

“Buy what you want.” Said Ruby. “I seem to remember you being quite good with a handgun.”

Sarah had stopped an Iranian patrol boat, almost by herself. That had been out of desperation when they’d been crossing the Caspian Sea, but the skill was there. Sarah ignored all the large revolvers and went straight for the Glock section. Shelves full of more versions of Glock pistols than any sane person could ever need, some in bright friendly colours.

“You can even have one in pink.” Said Ruby.

“Ewwwww.” Said Sarah.

Sarah went straight for the G43, picking up two and a couple of holsters. A light 9mm pistol that she could actually carry. Ruby was impressed and Sarah was grinning at her.

"I asked Kallina while we in London." She said. "She told me to get a G43 and a spare one as backup."

Ruby picked up one for herself; she had her own gifts as a backup.

"If Kallina likes it." She said. "That woman knows her weapons. Personal communicators next."

They needed a way to keep in touch, something high tech with a stealth feature and state of the art encryption. On the way they walked through the clothing section with various colours of military fatigues.

"Please don't put us in uniforms." Said Sarah.

"No way. Jeans and GAP are perfect for us. Maybe something to indicate friend from foe."

There was a vast selection of badges and flashes of cloth, to indicate who was on your side in a firefight.

"Who buys all this stuff?" Asked Sarah.

"I have a feeling that our new friend Ivan, supplies most of the mobsters in Russia."

Ruby threw a box of green cloth flashes into their trolley and then a box of brown. Nothing too bright, but something to show who was on the same side. The communicators were a similar case of too much choice. Nothing too complex, or with instructions in a language other than English. That narrowed the field quite a bit and Ruby chose something from General Dynamics that seemed to fit their needs. Serge was the expert on such things, but he was heading towards China.

"No price tags." Noted Sarah.

"As they say; if you have to ask the price, you can't afford it." Said Ruby.

They weren't in a hurry, so Ruby took another hour to look for battlefield med kits. She also picked up a few wicked looking knives, which seemed to almost call out to be purchased. They arrived back at the entrance, to find Olga still arguing with Sophie.

"Wow, that's a hell of a lot of kit." Said Sarah.

"Don't think of them as kids." Said Ruby. "They're strong, far stronger than they look. Think of them as pack horses in jeans and T shirts."

There was a mountain of equipment and ammunition would add quite a bit to the weight. By the time Ruby had decided what to leave behind, the kids would still probably be carrying more than the average infantryman, quite a bit more. Sophie was still clinging to the Bazooka, which was as long as she was tall and probably weighed as much as she did.

"Tell her she can't have it Ruby." Pleaded Olga.

Sophie had a look in her eyes, she was in love with the huge Russian weapon. It would be like trying to part her from a much loved pet rabbit.

"You really want to carry that for days?" Asked Ruby. "Right across North Korea, with its ammunition?"

"Yes Ruby. Please may I have it?"

Sophie had done well in Budapest. She deserved to get a reward.

"You'll have a pack to carry too." Added Olga.

"I'll manage."

She would too, even little Sophie could probably carry five hundred pounds on her back. Though toppling over might be an issue.

"Fine." Said Ruby. "She can have it."

Ivan was wandering over to price up their purchases. Ruby had money, but haggling was expected. Then she'd threaten to tell his men that hard as nails Ivan, was really called Alexandru. That had to be good for an extra five percent off.

"Did you pick up a Kalashnikov for me?" She asked Olga.

"I bought one for everyone and three spares."

"Perfect."

~ ~

Kallina had dropped him into a comfortable company flat, just behind Wigmore Street in London. There was a definite feminine feel to the décor and a lingering hint of Chanel No 5. Max did wonder if it had once been used by Ruby. Kallina had proven to be quite efficient, for a woman who was normally bat shit crazy. It appeared he'd be paid by the Polandrous Foundation, they'd even provide him with a bank account at a respectable bank and a contract of employment.

"George Polandrous will call and arrange to take you to lunch next week." Kallina had told him.

It annoyed him that they'd made all the arrangements, assuming he'd say yes to Kallina's offer.

There was nowhere else for him to go though and nowhere anywhere near as comfortable as the W1 flat. There was a credit card near the phone, a Barclaycard in a name he'd never heard of and a post it note stuck to it.

'For ordering takeaway food ONLY.'

There had also been two hundred pounds in an envelope, with a promise of more to come. It was still a prison in a way, a prison of money instead of stone walls. This prison had an en-suite shower though and deep pile carpets. There was even a lift to take him to the ground floor, where the door opened to let him out. It still felt like a cell though and might for some time. He picked up the phone and ordered his favourite Indian food. The credit card was accepted without query.

"Ok, time to earn your keep." He muttered.

He'd call Sadie after he'd eaten; it was still only mid-afternoon in Boston. Sadie Miller had been the one person in his office he'd really trusted, though she might think he was dead. There had been Cynthia of course, but Ruby had killed her. What would Sadie think when he called? Two years was a long time to vanish for.

"Hell of a sabbatical." He muttered.

Someone called Penny had left him a note and a thin file.

'PA to George Polandrous.' She'd signed it.

Penny seemed efficient. She'd given him all the key information, without burying him in bumf he'd never need. Quite a lot of information about the guys in smart suits, the thugs of North Korean security. Max just skimmed the information on the weapons they used and their threat level.

'Severe, likely to try to kill Ruby Mason, her friends and all of the thirteen.'

When they returned from invading Korea of course. Max had never seen a full list of the thirteen before. For some reason they'd all been given Ruby's surname, as though she was their mother.

'Charlotte Mason.'

'Eugenie Mason.'

The list gave their assumed dates of birth and country of origin. Max had guessed they were different, but some were born hundreds of years ago. The entry phone interrupted him.

"Up in the lift. Third floor, apartment eight."

Max had to give the delivery guy a large tip, all the notes in the envelope were twenties. He took his food into the kitchen and emptied most of it onto a plate. By the time he was looking at the file again, he was no longer shocked by seeing that Lau Mason had been born in twelve ninety seven.

“Fuck ! I knew they were weird.”

That could all wait. His first task had to be doing something about the private investigator who was looking into Sarah. Detective Sergeant Raymond Phelps had decided that earning under fifty thousand a year was mugs game. He’d accepted every bribe he could get and only escaped a prison term, by resigning. Max was assuming a lot of that from the page of notes Penny had given him. Max had known a few dirty cops in the USA, he’d employed a few. They were all greedy and that might be the way to deal with Raymond. He noted the Chingford address and decided to call on Ex Detective Sergeant Phelps, the following evening. The phone was on a short cable, he had to walk over to the hallway to use it. Even after two years, he still remembered her number.

“Hello.”

“Sadie, it me..... Max.”

Silence, just a slight crackle on the line.

“Are you there ?” He asked.

“Crap Max, you’re dead. I even went to your wake.”

“Who went ?”

They both laughed, it was such an absurd conversation.

“Everyone Max. You were on a one way mission, you told everyone that they wouldn’t see you again. You were a fucking crazy guy ! After a year we had a wake for you.”

At least they’d given him a year to turn up. He wouldn’t be officially dead, all his money in the USA would be safe. He was going to have a lot of strange conversations though, when he went back to America.

“Where have you been Max ?”

“I’ve had the kind of experience that people pay a fortune for Sadie. Like two years living with a guru in an Indian Ashram. I’m fine now.....I kind of found myself.”

She was chuckling down the line.

“So you’re not crazy now ?”

“Maybe, but not like I was.”

“I miss the old Max.”

That was his way in, a way to invite her to London.

“I miss you too. Do you want a job, in London ?”

More crackles on the line and a long pause. He didn’t interrupt her thinking time.

“Are you really ok now Max ? I saw the pictures of what was left of Cynthia.”

“I’m fine, really. The client over here is the Polandrous Foundation. We’ll be protecting a group of kids and a few of their employees.”

“Wow Max, you’re going up in the world.”

“Get on a plane Sadie. They gave be a great two bedroom apartment in W1, so no staying in crappy hotels.”

“I’d need to give notice where I am Max.”

“I need you Sadie.”

He did, he needed someone who was his. Someone who had shared experiences and wasn’t connected with Ruby and the strange kids. He needed to talk to someone who wasn’t Baba Yaga.

“Give me the number there.” Said Sadie. “I’ll book a flight and call you. You’d better meet me at Heathrow.”

“I’ll even bring a bunch of flowers.”

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