

Ruby 2

Chapter 1 – Beibu Gulf

“He was trying to kiss her and grin at the same time and it was adorable. He really did look a lot like Robert Pattinson, but from the first Twilight film, not the second crappy one.”

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The previous day had been a little wet, but now the weather was perfect. About 32 degrees and sunny, just the weather to lie under a deck umbrella and watch the beautiful small islands go by. They'd hired an entire tourist junk and its crew from Halong Bay in Vietnam and then drifted north east across the Beibu gulf. Their boat had red sails, as had all the others they'd passed on the way north. Ruby had hoped the reddish colour had some kind of local spiritual significance. Lau was with her and told her the truth, which was rather mundane.

“They tan the sails with a bark that turns the material a reddish brown.” He'd told her.

The China Seas were different now; they welcomed tourists from the west. Not just the Vietnamese, China had its 'Go West,' initiative to develop their coastal region next to Vietnam. Everyone was now friends, all past maritime disputes forgotten and everyone loved the western tourists with their piles of hard currency. Well, that was the official line. In reality, the China Seas were still full of disputed areas, which flared up into conflict every few years. Ruby didn't mind, she was used to sailing over troubled seas. Two years before, she'd travelled across the Caspian Sea in a vermin infested ferry. Lying on a deck lounge and watching the pretty little island go by, was going to be a doddle compared to that.

“It's so beautiful..... perfect.” Said Eugenie.

Eugenie was leaning on the boat's side and looking at the impossibly beautiful islands that sat in an unbelievably blue sea. It all looked so clean, as if someone vacuum cleaned it every night and filtered the water. Mass tourism would ruin it of course, but for now it was a little bit of paradise.

“Can we slow down and take another week to get there ?” Asked Charlotte.

“Oh yes, please !” Added Eugenie.

Lau just sat on a chair near the stern and ignored them all. He was taciturn, had been since Ruby had taken over responsibility for his safety and education. Sometimes he still had that faraway look in his eyes, but Ruby no longer thought he was planning to conquer the entire planet.

“No.” She answered. “I have some work to do for George and we'd miss Sarah's birthday.”

That cheered the girls up, even Lau looked at them and smiled. Sarah was about to turn thirty and her birthday party was likely to be memorable. They all liked Sarah, all thirteen of the precious children, or young adults as they were now. Sarah loathed that term of course, young adult.

“Young adult reminds me of YA fiction, bland and designed for dumb kids who never swear.” She'd once ranted. “Have you heard our little poppets talk to each other ?”

Ruby knew what she meant, left to their own devices the thirteen talked quite openly about their sexual experiences and used 'fuck,' the way most people used a full stop. Spider had been the first to refer to them as the thirteen and it had stuck. All of the thirteen loved Sarah, the way people love that risqué auntie who encourages them to try champagne mixed with crème de cassis. That auntie who helps them find excuses for spending the night with someone they shouldn't. Sarah's birthday party was likely to be a wild affair and it was why Ruby wanted to get the business in China

completed fairly quickly. No one wanted to miss Sarah's 30th. Olga came up the steep stairs from below decks and flopped herself onto the lounge next to Ruby.

"I was just showing the cook how to make 'Beef Olga.'" She said.

"I didn't know you spoke Vietnamese."

"I don't, I just point at the right tins and pray."

Ruby waved at one of the crew, who vanished and returned with another jug of cold lemonade. Eugenie had made the crew theirs, she did it more gently than Ruby. None of the crew looked lobotomised or walked like zombies. Most of the time the crew were just following the normal routine of giving a few rich tourists a happy vacation. They wouldn't object to crossing the border into Chinese waters though, in fact they'd be useful participants. Olga was there with her usual Kalashnikov, as backup, just in case things went pear shaped.

"I have to say." Said Olga. "You know how to do these things. No sneaking in by parachute at dead of night."

"George booked the junk for a corporate knees up." Said Ruby.

She saw Olga giving her that look, the one that says she doesn't get all of her London colloquialisms.

"Sorry ! He booked it as a client hospitality trip for the Polandrous Foundation." Said Ruby. "He's used the same boat charter company several times and they trust him."

"If it goes tits up." Added Charlotte. "The crew will say we were a gang of terrorists, who hijacked the boat."

Olga began laughing and Ruby joined in.

"Now you see Ruby." Said Olga. "They're picking up your Ruby English."

Charlotte chose to ignore the comments, she just watched the coast go by. She was grinning though.

"I think tits up is a Sarah-ism." Said Ruby.

George had booked the junk and the airline tickets. The Chinese government were getting a bit skittish, too many western journalists entering the country. That skittish attitude was passed onto the countries with a common border and that included Vietnam. Trouble with Falun Gong, a new flare up in Hong Kong and rumours of internal squabbles among the ruling elite. The Chinese government wasn't used to being on the front pages of the tabloids and they weren't enjoying it. The Polandrous Foundation were known to be safe and their bookings had gone through without any problems. The cook came up the stairs and shouted at them in his own local version of Vietnamese. Charlotte replied and he went below decks again.

"Dinner will be served in about five minutes." Said Charlotte.

"I heard my name in there." Said Olga.

"Yeah, I think you scare him a little."

Olga just grunted and poured herself a glass of lemonade. The junk was a nice way to get to a clandestine meeting, but George could afford it. She'd almost stopped working for George once the thirteen had become her responsibility. Part of the reason she'd carried on being his pretend PA was the money. How many jobs could pay a hundred grand, or more for an afternoons work ? Her various nest eggs under false names were growing and she'd need the money as the thirteen grew up. They were proving to be very high maintenance.

"Tuna and mayonnaise on toasted bread." Said Eugenie.

They could be random, but probably no more than any other kids their age. Their age was another unknown of course. Eugenie had been born in Paris in 1829, yet looked about eighteen or nineteen. All part of the process of keeping them safe until the great cleansing of Das Geheimnis had passed

them by. Kallina and Kurt had decided to keep them in stasis for most of the year, keeping them as children.

“What do you mean honey ?” Asked Olga.

“Sarah taught me about tuna and mayo sarnies.” She answered. “Really nice and almost no washing up.”

The cook came up the stairs with three of the other crew and began setting up the table for dinner. Unless it was raining, all meals were eaten on the open deck, where it was coolest. The food was mostly out of tins and always came with rice or noodles, but tonight it smelt wonderful. Ruby sat herself at the head of the table and hoped the food would taste as good as its aroma promised.

“Oh, and the most important lesson.” Said Charlotte. “Though Sarah hasn’t mentioned it in a while.” “Go on, tell us.” Said Ruby.

“Never trust the fuckers at the job centre.”

Ruby smiled at Olga as everyone chuckled. In many ways, Sarah was probably their best teacher about surviving in the urban jungle. Ruby had clung to her old friends for much the same reason she’d really carried on working for George. It was because of loyalty and trust. Sarah was a head case but she’d never say no if a friend needed help. Spider was the same, as was Serge in his own way. As for George ? He’d put on army fatigues and dropped into a desert in Turkmenistan to find her. A middle aged businessman and he’d jumped out of a plane in the middle of the night. With a gun in his hands ! She’d once looked into her bathroom mirror and said it out loud, yet part of her still found it almost unbelievable. He could easily have died or been crippled for life, but he’d come to save her. So she’d carry on working for him for as long as he wanted her too.

“Oh wow Olga, this is delicious.” She said.

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The Polandrous Foundation still resided at the same address in London, EC1. An anonymous looking office block, with fifteen floors of offices. George’s company had been on just three floor of the building, but business had been good and they had gradually spread themselves across five floors. You’d still have trouble finding the small brass plaque that said it was the registered office of The Polandrous Foundation. George liked to live slightly in the shadows.

George Polandrous actually owned the entire building and several others; his eponymous foundation was effectively paying him rent. Some of it was for tax efficiency of course, owning the property through offshore companies controlled by nominees. Most of the reason he kept his wealth behind at least six different aliases was fear of the unknown, fear that the next police raid might come when he was old and grey.

Actually most of his hair had been grey since his mid-thirties. He still had the same office and Penny was still his PA, but he’d given her a large increase in salary after the ‘incident’ two years before. He’d also given her a better office with a decent view, or as decent as any view of rainy London ever gets. He entered her office and sat himself in one of her visitor’s chair.

“Have you heard from her ?” He asked.

“Her boat reached the last check in point on the official tourist route.”

He knew the local time, had the time difference hard wired into his brain. It was dinner time, they’d be settling down to have a meal together.

“By the time they finish dinner.” He said. “They’ll be outside of their agreed route.”

“Terry knows people.” Said Penny. “But they’re five hundred miles away.”

Terry the last survivor of the team he’d taken with him to save Ruby the last time. Terry had seen some strange things there, out in the desert. He rarely spoke of it though and he’d seemed pleased

when George had offered him the position of Head of Security for the foundation. There had been a police raid then, after just about his entire security team had been wiped out.

“Get them closer.” He said. “Without treading on any toes.”

He saw the look in Penny’s eyes, the ‘oh no, not again,’ look. Ruby was an expensive liability at times, but he wouldn’t have a business without her.

“I’ll let him know right away.” Said Penny.

George never understood all the fuss about insider dealing in the City. Everybody did it, it was the only way to make any serious money. A friend told you a little information and you made money out of it and rewarded them at a later date. There was no direct link to cause the serious fraud people any sleepless nights. Ruby was different though, she could pull the truth straight out of the mind of a CEO, or whoever was doing the deal. It made her priceless to him and one of a kind. He also had to admit to having some paternal feelings for her.

“Tell him to look after her Penny.” He said. “Whatever the cost.”

He just hoped it wouldn’t mean getting threatened by the security services again. If it been the Americans he could have lived with it, but to be threatened by Her Majesty’s Government ! He still had a stiff knee from the last jump into hostile territory and hoped he wouldn’t have to do that all over again.

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Rupert Bailey had changed quite a lot since Ruby had made him relatively rich. For a start he now had a passport with his own name in it, though very few people knew the name he was born with. Spider was his preferred name, mainly because his father had hated the nick name. A boy child who was half Bengali and half Glaswegian and they’d called him Rupert..... Hell, it was almost guaranteed to turn him into a complete fuckup. He was still living in the same rented house in a lively part of West London, he’d become rather fond of the place. There was a nice hiding place for his much loved Browning 9mm, under the lawn roller in his shed. Not that he ever rolled the patch of grass and cat crap that passed for a lawn, but the roller wasn’t easy to move, unless you knew what you were doing. His features fitted the area too, there were a lot of Asian faces in Ealing and no one bothered him. Spider really didn’t like people who bothered him. He banged on the door of his spare bedroom.

“Are you up yet Monique ?”

They all took turns looking after and educating the thirteen, all of them, no exceptions.

“I’m ok with the guys, but young girls Ruby !” He’d pleaded. “I walk about in just my boxers from April to October and I’m drunk most nights. Can’t you and Sarah look after them ?”

“I feel sorry for them Spider, I’ve seen you first thing in the morning.”

“Yeah, very funny.”

“No exceptions Spider and there’s money in the kitty to pay for their lodgings. You won’t be out of pocket.”

So it had been arranged and he was now part of the four month rotation, looking after two or three, sometimes four of the thirteen. Their skills were actually useful to him, his various ways of earning money were rarely easy or honest. As to teaching them ? They all seemed to pick things up remarkably quickly.

“Monique ! It’s ten o’clock !”

“Ok, ok, I’m dressing.”

Spider had no experience with young people at all, he barely remembered being one himself. He had expected them to be out of bed at dawn and banging on his door. They all slept like door mice

though and he often found it difficult to get Monique out of bed before eleven. She was one of their mystery kids, who had come from somewhere in the Middle East when most of it was called Persia. No idea when she'd been born, but Spider was beginning to guess that it had a long time ago. Next to be woken up was Fabio, who was on the sofa bed in his lounge.

"Come on Fabio, it's....."

Fabio was out of bed and the lounge looked to have been cleaned. A head came round the door from the kitchen area and Spider picked up the smell of bacon cooking.

"Ahh Spider." Said Fabio. "I'm making you a fry up. Ready in ten minutes."

"Great."

That was how it was with everything, show them something once and they not only learned it, they were good at it. Frying bacon to taking an AK47 apart, everything was learned by watching and imitation.

"Then they work on it." Serge had said. "Until they do it better than their teacher."

There wasn't much known about any of the kids, the thirteen. Fabio had been grabbed by Kurt when he was still a very young child. Born in Naples Italy in around 1845 was all that Spider knew about him. Monique wandered into the room, her black jeans still not quite done up and she obviously hadn't showered or dressed properly.

"Any bacon going spare?" She asked. "I'm starving."

"Yes." Shouted Fabio. "Ten minutes and you can both eat."

There was just the two of them staying with him now, Ruby worked out the rotations and the first he usually knew was when they turned up on his doorstep. Always on a Sunday morning, having travelled by various strange routes from where they'd been. Sometimes they shared beds, usually boy and girl, but sometimes other mixtures. Kallina and Kurt had tried to stop them having sex, but Ruby had taken a different view.

"They're young and healthy." She'd said. "We'll get all the girls on the pill and educate them all in the use of condoms. Then we scare the crap out of them with the consequences of having children." Basically she'd given them the UK schools version of sex education and it had worked. Two years and there hadn't been a single case of a sexually transmitted disease or pregnancy.

Spider wandered into the kitchen and sat in his usual place and a large steaming mug of coffee was placed in front of him. By the time he'd properly woken up, Fabio handed him a perfectly cooked fry up, complete with fresh tomatoes and a slice of fried bread. Nearly all of the thirteen now appreciated a good fry up, but few could have made one as well as Fabio.

"We might have to talk to Ruby about you staying for a while." Said Spider.

"It's good." Added Monique.

There was the slight aroma of unwashed armpits coming from Monique, but she'd shower and wash before they went out. She'd tried to climb into bed with him once and he'd unceremoniously pushed her onto the floor. She was still there the next morning, fast asleep on top of his slippers. She really could sleep anywhere. It wasn't that he didn't fancy her, she scrubbed up quite well. It was just that Ruby would definitely never forgive him.

"Today we'll buy Sarah some birthday presents." He said.

They were too busy eating to reply, but they both smiled.

"I think H & M do gift cards." He continued. "Sarah likes their clothes."

There was a look exchanged between his guests that reminded him that he wasn't the cool guy he often liked to think he was.

"Leave it to us." Said Monique.

Spider continued with breakfast, Fabio had even cooked a few extra rashers to top up his plate. All of the thirteen had helped him with his various non-legal activities, Ruby hadn't objected even slightly. "Teach them Spider, it'll all be useful. Just don't get them arrested." She'd told him.

The first part he was beginning to enjoy, the second part was more difficult. Arrest was an occupational hazard if you regularly walked the thin line of what was legal. Every ex-con will tell you that no matter how good you are, a cop will eventually be taking your fingerprints and picture. Timing was often the key thing and thanks to government cut backs, there were less cops about to accidentally trip over.

"Today my children we have some money to collect." He said.

"After getting Sarah's present?" Asked Monique.

"No before, so you need to shower and be ready to leave before midday."

Spider didn't usually mind the almost nocturnal existence of many of the thirteen, most of his business was conducted after dark.

"We're collecting some money today, from someone not too keen on paying." He continued.

He had their interest now, he was yet to meet any of the thirteen who didn't enjoy helping him break the law.

"I remember." Said Fabio. "First rule is that we mustn't let anyone thump you."

Spider nodded, he particularly liked that rule, he drummed it into all the kids. They were all far stronger than him and capable of subduing huge guys.

"I'll ask him for the money and of course he'll say he's broke."

"Then I look into his mind to see if he's lying." Said Monique

"Excellent." Said Spider, "While you both make sure rule one isn't broken."

Spider left the house with his pupils following behind. Today they'd learn a little more about demanding money with menaces and extortion. None of them were carrying a weapon, not so much as a sharpened screwdriver. The kids were weapons and if the police took an interest, it was just Uncle Rupert showing his niece and nephew around London.

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Sarah Simmons had moved three months after returning from their trip east. She'd liked her tiny Social Housing flat, but it reminded her of too many trips to the crisis centre, too many sanctions from the job centre and the work programme. Her old neighbours had become used to that version of Sarah, the one who screwed everything up. They still banged on her door if they hadn't seen her moving around by eleven. That didn't help, she resented it, they were using good intentions to stick pins in her doll. Her new flat was hers, or would be once the mortgage was paid off.

Sarah had arrived back with Spider and lots of money. The relationship with Spider had lasted less time than the milk in her fridge, so Sarah had begun looking for a proper home, somewhere that was hers.

"Nothing too flash." She'd told Ruby. "Two bedrooms in a London postcode that no one admits to living in."

It was Ruby who told her about the interest the tax man would take in her if she suddenly bought her own flat for cash. Sarah had come home with a bag full of cash from various countries, a prepaid VISA card, several certificates of deposit and a completion bonus from Ruby. One night she added it all up on the back of a cereal packet and it came to over six hundred thousand pounds. She was sat in a flat with a fridge that barely worked, a TV that hissed at her and a bed that had come with the flat.

“Buy a flat for cash after signing on for three years and the tax man will get a whole team to investigate you and the DWP might well join them.” Ruby had told her.

“I didn’t sign on for three years. There were a few temp jobs.”

“Ok, on and off for three years. They got Al Capone you know, the tax people.”

Ruby had introduced her to Robert, an accountant who actually talked everyday English and didn’t patronise her. Robert had come with a warning.

“Sleep with him and ruin his life and I won’t find you another.”

Sarah hadn’t slept with Robert, even though he was cute and looked a bit like Robert Pattinson, if the light was right. He was too useful as an accountant to risk screwing.

“You need a few things we can say are bringing in money, what are your interests ?” He’d asked.

Cheap wine and casual sex came to mind, but she remembered the wall chart of transferable skills that the job centre had once gone through with her.

“Languages.” She said. “I’m good with languages.”

“Good, which ones ?”

“Just about all of them I think.”

That had excited Robert and some kind of language school and translation service was suggested.

“And I’m artistic, I’ve put together a few websites.”

A week later and Sarah was the proprietor of a language school, a translation service and a company that specialised in designing web sites in East European languages. They didn’t exist of course, apart from the very impressive looking websites. The important thing was they matched her demonstrable skills, just in case the tax man took an interest.

Two more weeks and Sarah had found the two bedroom first floor flat in Enfield Town and obtained a mortgage acceptance on it. The mortgage had seemed miraculous, given her poor credit history. A few phone calls from Robert and a reference from someone Ruby knew and a finance company she’d never heard of, was lending her three hundred thousand for twenty five years.

“You’ll have to practise amongst yourselves when Robert gets here.” She said.

“Yes Sarah.”

They were so polite and Sarah wondered if it was rubbing off on her. It had been months she’d shouted abuse at anyone, even when she was drunk. She had three of the kids with her, three of the thirteen. A good name Spider had thought up, it focused the mind on how few of them there were and how precious they were.

They were all natural linguists, but Patrick was brilliant and seemed to soak languages up like a sponge. He was another of their mystery kids. Born in Eastern Europe, but no one was certain when and where. Patrick was a name given to him by Kallina of course, most of the children had been given new names by Kurt and Kallina.

“Why don’t text books teach language the way it’s actually spoken ?” Asked Trudy.

The old question that all who studied language knew well. Trudy was from Bermuda and was born in nineteen fifty five. She was rare, in that they knew her full history from birth.

“Text books are how purists and schools wished people spoke.” Answered Sarah. “You’d never sell a text book that gave the language of the street.”

Imran was sat on her couch and reading intently. He’d recently arrived outside of the normal rotation, there had been problems between him and Serge. Sometimes Serge expected too much of them, pushed too hard. After her, Imran would go to Spider and have a fun few months learning how to extort money out of people. Imran had been born in India in about seventeen eighty, but no one knew where in India.

"Doing ok Imran ?" She asked.

"Yes, thank you."

He had a nice smile; Serge expected them all to be a cross between Albert Einstein and Galileo when really they were just like normal kids most of the time. Sarah made sure they all had enough to do and refreshments, she was becoming a bit of a mother hen as far as the thirteen were concerned. Robert was coming to see her about her various business concerns and recent letters received from the tax people. The entry phone system made its loud siren noise, Sarah kept meaning to change it for something more mellow.

"I'll be busy with Robert for about an hour." She said.

They'd be good, they always were. She let Robert in the main door to the block and then waited for him at the outside door to her flat. It was a ritual she went through every time someone called, worrying that they might get lost on the way up the stairs and along one corridor.

"I've never had an entry phone before." She'd told Ruby, by way of explanation.

Her accounting guru was led into the lounge and sat at the table she'd decorated with the various letters from the HMRC, DWP, even something about the data protection act. She fetched coffee while he read everything and scooped it up into several different piles. He had a letter for her to sign, there always seemed to be something needing her to sign her life away.

"Reminds me of the job centre." She said.

"This tells the tax people to send me copies of everything." Said Robert. "Your various business interests have reached the stage where you'll need a lot more help with your accounts."

She felt her world collapsing around her. Accounts were boring; numbers weren't her thing at all. There was one potential upside though.

"Will that mean seeing you more often ?" She asked. "Er... To do the accounts....I meant."

He smiled and she really could see him almost sparkling in the sunlight coming through her windows.

"I'm a little expensive." He said. "I could do it, or I can recommend a bookkeeper to come in a couple of times a week."

"I'd prefer if you did it. I know you."

"Fine, we can agree the times before I go. There are a few urgent items though."

She looked at the piles of paper and instantly felt depressed.

"Why am I so popular with so many government departments ?" She asked.

"You're doing well Sarah, your businesses really are making enough to give you a comfortable lifestyle."

"No way !"

Robert opened his lap top and began to show her numbers for the Language School and the recent billings. Ruby had recommended her to a few people, quite a few people actually. Then there had been confidential translation work and the thirteen had been helping her with a website for a Bulgarian Airline. It all added up and the figures on Robert's spreadsheet were making her head spin.

"I'm a success ?"

"Oh yes Sarah, you are."

She pushed his laptop across the table and kissed him, clambering onto his lap and taking her time over it. He kissed back and she let it carry on for a while, before pulling back.

"Are you married ?"

"No."

"Steady girl friend ?"

Something in his eyes, he briefly looked down and away from her. So there was someone in his life, there had to be. Some woman had put her mark on Robert, it was only to be expected. She moved close again, letting their lips just touch.

“Do you bruise easily ?”

He was trying to kiss her and grin at the same time and it was adorable. He really did look a lot like Robert Pattinson, but from the first Twilight film, not the second crappy one.

“No.” He answered.

Ruby would know and go crazy, there was no hiding anything from Ruby. Sarah began to unbutton his shirt as she kissed him. Trudy was working in her bedroom, so they’d have to make do with the couch.

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Ruby liked being in the peace and quiet of the islands on the Vietnamese border with China. She could control her gifts far better since meeting Kurt and they were much stronger. She let her mind wander and felt a young girl dreaming in a village over a hundred miles away. Language didn’t matter, Ruby felt emotions. The girl was feeling happy and there was lust in the mix, a dream about her boyfriend, or someone she wished was her boyfriend. It was so much easier to focus her skills, without the millions of minds around her in a city like London. Zhenzhu Harbour was north east of them, but the girl was sleeping in an inland village. Ruby wasn’t just being a mental voyeur, she’d feel anyone who might be taking an interest in them and she felt only the one they’d come to rescue. Rescue !? Perhaps not the right word, he had a piece of technology that Ruby wanted to either recover or destroy. She pushed her gift out to cover hundreds of square miles and only one mind was concerned about Ruby Mason.

A visitor was expected, so Ruby wasn’t surprised when a large and rather chubby grey cat began head butting her leg and wanting to be petted. She picked Constanze up, enjoying the way the cat instantly started to give off a loud purr.

“She loves you Ruby.”

“She’s getting fat Kallina.” Answered Ruby. “I think she’s tricking you into feeding her several times a day again.”

Ruby turned and was pleased to see that Kallina had come as herself and not as Baba Yaga. Kallina, born to a nomad family on the Russian Steppes in seventeen hundred and two. She still looked no more than thirty and her long blonde hair reflected the moonlight.

“Constanze is a clever cat, but she gets confused about her meal times.”

Ruby just smiled in reply.

“Ok, ok, maybe I get confused. Constanze bites me and tells me she’s hungry and I feed her. Did I tell you that she was given to me to look after by Mozart’s wife ?”

That was a new part of the story, usually Kallina claimed her cat had been named after Mozart’s wife. Kurt had once confirmed that some of the story was true, Kallina had been friends with Constanze Mozart in the eighteen thirties. Kallina had a great deal of power, but Ruby doubted that she had the ability or inclination to keep a cat alive for nearly two hundred years. Kallina was quite insane of course, but Ruby loved her like a sister. Constanze just seemed happy to be petted, so Ruby sat down to do a thorough job of it.

“You should get one of the thirteen to feed her.” She said.

Kallina was scowling at her, she considered any mention of that number to be unlucky.

“Don’t call them that, it’s not good !” She hissed.

“How are they doing ?”

“Good, they all love learning what I can teach them.”

They did, everyone loved being taught by Baba Yaga, the infamous witch of Russian folklore. Kurt was adamant that Kallina was the original Baba Yaga, who’d inspired all the stories that children knew from Russia, right across Romania and down into the Balkans. Every child had grown up with tales of Baba Yaga and her cat. Ruby tended to think that Kallina had based herself on the Russian witch and eventually taken on the persona completely.

“I noticed interest in the picture of Isobel has died down.” Said Ruby.

“Sorry Ruby, I will be more careful. I drift a little and the poor child just wanted a better look at a bird’s nest.....”

“It could have happened to any of us Kallina.” Said Ruby. “It will happen again, just be thankful that we live in the Photoshop age.”

Kallina had taken three of the kids into a wood near her home, she was still living in the house near Batumi in Georgia. Isobel had wanted to see some chicks in a nest and no one had seen the two hikers. Everyone has a camera these days and a day later the picture of Isobel went viral. A high definition picture of Isobel, floating fifty feet off the ground.

“People are stupid.” Said Kallina. “Show them a blurry picture of a dinner plate and they think it’s a UFO. Show them a clear picture of a young girl levitating and they call it a fake.”

It was true, the conspiracy theory generation was working in their favour. Experts had been discussing it in the mainstream press, saying that the picture was too clear to be genuine. The picture had just about vanished from the net and the hikers had been written off as fakers.

“He’s there.” Said Kallina. “You must feel him too ?”

“Yes and tomorrow I’ll know if the device is really there.”

They both looked north, though there was nothing to see except miles of dark ocean.

“I could come with you.” Said Kallina.

“It should be fine, I’m not expecting trouble. If there is, the thirt.... Kids can handle it.”

It was why they were training them, even letting Spider teach them how to be street fighters. There was no use teaching them the skills, if they were constantly being sheltered from every threat.

“Charlotte has the anger in her.” Said Kallina. “She hides it, like you did Ruby. Give her no choice and she will use it.”

Ruby carried on scratching Constanze’s ears for a while, there is no way to hurry a cat that wants to be petted. Then Kallina took her and they both instantly vanished. Only Kurt and Kallina could use that gift in a controlled and focused way. Ruby still tended to use emotions to release her powers, but she couldn’t reliably move herself across continents, the way Kallina could.

Once she’d had an argument with Serge, after they’d both had far too much to drink. Ruby had suddenly found herself in the back garden of the house where she’d grown up. It was the shed that held the memories that had brought her there. The shed where she’d played with her childhood friends, where they’d sworn to be best friends forever. It was the one place in the world she thought of as completely safe, her refuge. Now Lucy was dead and she hadn’t seen Angela in years, but their names were still carved into the wood of the shed wall. Friends forever in the middle of a large heart, painted red.

Ruby got up and went to her bed, she needed a few hours sleep before illegally setting foot on Chinese soil.

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