

Ruby 2

Chapter 17 – Useless Information

“We don’t have a Guantanamo George, but there are nations out there, mostly ex-colonies, who will gladly drop someone in a hole, forever.”

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Spider had a problem saying no to authority figures, he even became a little breathless from having a serious disagreement with a boss, or a superior officer. It was years of army training of course, they frowned upon anyone who asked too many questions. Spider hadn’t asked a lot of questions, just one important one. Finally he’d disobeyed orders when no one gave him a sensible reply. Now he’d almost forgotten what deeply held belief had caused him to be demoted back to being Private Bailey. The reason didn’t matter; marking a line in the sand had been the important thing.

“No ! Sorry George, but I’m not doing that.”

He heard George gasp, no one apart from Ruby had ever said no to him, as far as he was aware. He could hear George wanting to shout, his voice rising with indignation. George obviously decided that might not work and resorted to reasoning with Spider.

“Ruby did leave me to co-ordinate matters in London and Max isn’t answering any of his three phones. You need to rescue the three kids and Max’s prisoner. The information in his head must be priceless.”

His military training had included a lot of courses about what was and wasn’t valuable intelligence. It had to be verified by a second source, especially when obtained by torture. Delivery was the key thing though, getting the intelligence where it was needed. George was an amateur, even if a very gifted one.

“You missed something George.” He said. “Even if this guy is giving us accurate and valuable information, we have no way of delivering it to Ruby.”

“I didn’t think Spider. There is Baba Yaga, if you can contact her ?”

“She’ll be looking for her own revenge and you’ll only see her if your orders gets one of her precious kids killed. I’ve seen her in action George, you don’t want her looking for you.”

“We’re not fucking kids !” Snapped Monique.

She had his full attention. Sophie had once said something similar, but it had been said as a joke. Monique wasn’t joking; her face was flushed with anger.

“Sorry Monique, force of habit.” He said. “Young adults seems to be the correct term these days.”

She was nodding but still looked upset. George was on the line, but he left him to kiss Monique on the cheek.

“I’m really sorry. Are we ok ?”

“We’re fine. Just find out if we’re going to Essex tonight or having the usual Thai takeaway.”

George hadn’t hung up, he hadn’t expected him to.

“So George, you can see why anything they might have obtained from this North Korean guy is really useless information.”

“I heard most of that Spider. They’re good for you, I knew they would be.”

“Ruby’s young adults do grow on you George.”

Monique playfully thumped him on the shoulder. Spider had never really understood women, which was probably why he was close to forty and still single. He was learning though.

“We’ll get our usual takeaway and forget all about Max and Sadie then.” Said Spider.

He could hear George tapping his fingers on his desk, while Monique and Fabio looked at him expectantly.

“There is no point in Max having so many of our precious..... Assets. I must stop calling them kids. Foxy called me and said MI5 are looking for Max, he left a slaughterhouse in Cricklewood for them to clean up. All North Koreans Spider. We may not be on the best of terms with the government in Pyongyang, but Max just broke several of the golden rules of espionage. Get our people back and try not to kill anyone while you do it. Use Foxy as a get out of jail card if you run across anyone from MI5.”

“If it comes to it, is Max expendable ?” Asked Spider.

“I’d prefer it if MI5 took care of him, he never really has been on our side. Max just likes money and finding excuses to kill people. Sadie might be different, though her loyalties are bound to be with Max. If there’re no alternative, you can kill them both. Be careful though, Max does have a bit of a knack at surviving just about everything.”

The call ended and his two young adults were keen, he could see it in their eyes.

“Who wants a gun ?” He asked.

Two hands held high, Kallina must have taught them that. All their powers and they still loved weapons that used cordite to fire bullets.

“Come on then, let’s find you a gun each and then we’re going to get our people back.”

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One of Terry’s guys was an expert at starting just about any vehicle, without the key. Serge ceased to be surprised by their general expertise at most things illegal. They’d found a fish packing plant with a few trucks left in the yard overnight. Some were refrigerated truck, but several were full of dried fish, stacked in boxes. Terry had organised the removal of over fifty boxes. It took a while, but eventually they were heading north at a steady forty miles an hour. Serge was taking a turn in the back, with the smell of fish.

“I’d swear the stink wasn’t this bad when we cleared it out.” He Said.

“It’s an old van.” Said Matt. “Years of fish heads and guts have worked their way into every crevice.”

It eventually became unbearable and opening the vent in the van roof, only seemed to make it worse. They were stopping about every half hour, to get out and have a few minutes of fresh air. Serge had been travelling in the front of the van, but had given his seat to Trudy, who’d been suffering badly from what they were jokingly calling ‘Fishitus.’

“It’s over half an hour, they should have stopped by now.” Said Matt.

“I’ll bang on the wall.” Said Serge.

He didn’t need to, the van swung gently over to the right and stopped.

“Thank Christ for that !” Someone shouted.

Lisa was with him in the back, her face full of relief as the rear doors were opened. The front cab had been designed for three people, four at a push. Unsurprisingly five had crammed themselves into the space, which didn’t smell of fish.

“How many other vehicles on the road ?” Serge asked the driver.

“Nothing has passed us and only one car going the other way.”

“Sounds like we can risk a fifteen minute fresh air break.” Said Serge.

Terry merely nodded at him. Quiet roads meant a fairly slim chance of a being notice by a passing motorist. Serge gave his people a few minutes, before giving Roger a map of the area.

“Where are we Roger ?”

“Here.”

Roger pointed at a place on the map which looked a long way from the Yalu River. They seemed to have covered quite a distance since liberating the fish van.

“And the nearest Chinese troops ?”

“Outside of my range, which is considerable.” Answered Trudy.

“How much longer in that awful van ?” Asked Lisa.

Terry was still within earshot and provided an answer.

“We run out of fuel in an hour.” He said. “Then we either steal something else, or start travelling by foot again.”

Serge looked for the nearest rail line and it was well beyond their remaining fuel. He wanted to be away from worrying about fuel and disgusting odours. Finding a freight car heading north would solve most of their problems.

“Roger.” He said. “You were right last time. Allowing for our fuel, where do you think we’ll be able to pick up another truck ?”

“No fish this time.” Said Lisa.

Roger muttered with the others and pointed north east of where they were. It meant using a busy main highway, but he doubted if anyone was looking for a stolen fish van.

“Post office, main one for the district.” Said Roger. “Post is huge in China, much like the UK before everything went electronic or online. There will be all sorts of vans picking up and collecting.”

Terry was nodding his approval.

“No one stops a postie.” He said. “We’ll just have to try and do it without being seen.”

Serge marked the route with yellow highlighter and gave the map to Terry.

“I’ll tell the driver, but we’ll need Roger in the front again.”

Roger was grinning from ear to ear. There were advantages to being the team’s navigator.

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Monique drove, Spider seemed quite confident in her driving ability. His car, there hadn’t been time to hire one under a fake ID. As instructed, she parked just within sight of the target address.

“Two unmarked black vans, we know what that means!” Said Fabio.

“MI5 beat us to it.” Replied Spider.

He was alone in the back with Fabio in the front with her. Nowhere near enough space to add another four passengers.

“A problem we’ll need to solve at the time.” Spider had told her.

There seemed to be quite a few problems that would need solving on the fly. Spider leant forward and glared at the two black vans, parked at a weird angle on the driveway. Half on the drive, half on the grass, it was the sort of thing that shrieks of a house being raided. There was also a car at the kerbside, which might or might not be with the vans.

“What are you guys picking up ?” He asked.

She and Fabio had agreed on Georgian as their common language. They’d been taught it when quite young and it had the advantage of being gobbledegook to Spider. Their mentor had a lot of skills, but he knew just English and enough Thai to order a decent meal. Not that they wanted to keep anything from him, it was just nice to be able to keep their private chatter, private.

“They will know we’re here by now, Imran, Isobel and Delmar.” Said Fabio. “They will sense us in the same way we can tell where they are.”

“The one from North Korea is quite agitated.” She added. “Still broadcasting his emotions like a broken radio. More confusion than fear in his mind.”

Spider was checking over his beloved Browning 9mm, not usually a good sign. She felt her own jacket, instinctively checking that her automatic was still in the pocket.

“Our people.” Said Spider. “Are they uninjured, can you tell that ? What the hell is going on in there ?”

Spider seemed ready to lose it, but she knew that was just his way of handling things. He was like a reverse swan; everything under the surface was calm, while he just appeared to panic. She looked into the rather ugly Chingford house. Fabio did likewise and they shared two or three sentences in Georgian. Whatever information they gave Spider needed to be accurate and consistent. Ruby’s rules of course, well learned.

“All three are in a room at the back of the house. Moving about, so we can assume they’re not tied up or seriously injured.” She told Spider. “The one from Korea is static, no movement since we arrived.”

“That suggests some form of confinement.” Added Fabio

“And the others in there, the security services ?” Asked Spider.

Being almost infallible was important, Ruby had explained it was one of their biggest assets, even if it was a bit of a myth. Monique decided to be honest, rather than just vague about her knowledge.

“Our people sort of glow.” She said. “Humans are just a uniform kind of mauve.”

“I see them as light grey.” Added Fabio.

Spider was nodding at them, grasping the idea that they weren’t like having CCTV in the house. Ruby always frowned at revealing details of their gifts. Spider was different though, he was family and had come close to being her lover.

“There are at least ten humans in the house.” She said. “Might be a dozen. As the vans are empty, we have to assume that two of those humans are Max and Sadie.”

“Crap ! That leaves a lot of cops or MI5.” Said Spider.

By good luck or bad, the front door of the house was opened at that moment. It was a tableau guaranteed to make every news broadcast, if there had been anyone to film it. A young and immaculately dressed woman left the house first. Behind her two uniformed police officers, who seemed to be trying to hold Max Krause up and restrain him at the same time. Max wore handcuffs and leg irons, making it impossible for him to run.

“He looks to have taken a beating.” Said Fabio.

“I bet he deserved it.” Said Spider.

Next out of the door were two police officers in their full urban warfare uniform. Like modern day gladiators with high tech weaponry, they kept constantly glancing to left and right.

“They must be terrified of Max.” She said.

The woman reached the van doors and unlocked them, a strong cross bar and two other locks. From a distance it would look like any other commercial vehicle, but in reality, it was a mobile prison.

There was no restraint shown for an injured man, one already suffering from a damaged hip. They literally threw Max into the van and closed the door.

“It’ll be Sadie next,” said Spider, “I’d bet anything on it. If it is, we have to move the instant they have her in the van.”

He was right, Sadie was next and they did her the respect of treating her no differently to Max. Sadie now had a pronounced limp and a bandage across her left cheek.

“I think they must have put up quite a fight.” Said Fabio.

“None of the cops looks damaged.” She said.

Sadie was thrown into the van, before the young woman locked it and gave the keys to one of the cops. They both looked at the van and laughed, but it was impossible to hear their conversation. Monique was picking up pleasure that Max was finally under lock and key.

“Now !” Said Spider. “Before they begin rounding up our people.”

Spider was out of the car and walking swiftly towards the mixed group of MI5 people and cops.

Monique had to almost run to keep up with him, Fabio keeping back a little.

“Don’t reach for your guns unless I go for mine.” Said Spider.

A middle aged man in a suit came out of the house, followed by two more cops in full body armour. The odds had already been against them, now they were ridiculous. The woman noticed them first, as Spider strode towards them.

“Stop ! This area is off limits to the public.” She said. “Leave or you will be arrested.”

Monique felt no real concern from the woman, just a wish to for them to leave. Her mood changed drastically as Spider gave them his ultimatum. He walked towards the middle aged man, until one of the cops began to get a little fidgety with his expensive looking assault rifle.

“Take Max and Sadie !” He shouted. “Dump them in a hole in the ground if you like, but I can’t let you take the..... Young adults.”

Agitation was the key mental state of the cops, who looked around, as if unsure how to handle Spider and his companions.

“Call Sir Edwin Fox.” Said Spider. “Have your people talk to his.”

Two of the cops raised their weapons ever so slightly. The general mood changed and the chances of a peaceful resolution to the standoff seemed to be fading. Monique found herself smiling at the young woman in the immaculate clothing, keeping eye contact.

“You really don’t want to see where this might end !” Yelled Monique.

Ruby had moved a few heavy objects, including a large truck during one field exercise in the Georgian countryside. Baba Yaga was the real expert at chucking about inanimate objects, but Monique had some skill in it. She lifted the van with Max and Sadie inside, feeling Fabio giving her much of his own strength.

“Call Foxy !” Yelled Spider. “Call him and we can all go home in one piece.”

Fear now, as she raised the van about six inches off the ground and gently made it rotate. Nothing too drastic of course, it had to remain driveable. A few of the strange amalgam of MI5 and cops were experiencing real fear, they’d obviously seen files on Das Geheimnis. Reading an old file is different to seeing the impossible become reality. Monique let the van drop onto its wheels, enjoying the loud clang as it landed. As Ruby often said;

“A little theatricality is often worth a thousand words.”

Monique kept eye contact with the middle aged guy now, reinforcing his fears, pushing him gently towards the obvious way out. He simply nodded at the young woman in the expensive business clothes.

“Sue is calling Foxy’s office.” Said the middle aged guy.

Giving them a name, he really was terrified. Most of the files would show deaths by fire, no one’s ideal way of dying. The dark saloon by the kerb was theirs, Sue climbed into the back to use her smartphone in private. For at least five or six minutes they faced each other, uncertain how things would go. A few lights were on in other houses now, people twitching curtains. Soon the cameras would be recording the odd goings on in Chingford. Everyone needed the situation to end peacefully and quickly.

Sue got out of the car and simply showed something on her phone to the middle aged guy. That was it, nothing further was said. They left, quickly coming out of the house. A large group of cops and three people who looked like MI5. They crammed into the vans, two going in the van with Max and Sadie. The remainder just about fitted into the saloon and five minutes after showing her phone to what was obviously her boss, they'd gone.

"I think we just won." Said Fabio.

"Come on, we need to get inside." Said Spider. "Before we all end up on YouTube."

The front door had been left slightly ajar, the hallway a mess of discarded boxes and clothes. How long had MI5 been there ? Certainly long enough to have gone through the house, probably realising it didn't belong to Max or Sadie.

"Yay, thanks for saving our dicks." Said Delmar.

Imran and Isobel were sat on an old sofa, while Delmar paced about like a trapped cat. She was glad they were all uninjured of course, yet she was drawn to the skinny Korean guy, sat at the back of the room.

"Monique, meet Ji-hu." Said Delmar.

He had his eyes closed, his breathing scarily shallow. All his vital signs showed a human declining towards death. Ji-hu wasn't human though. Fabio was next to her, looking eagerly at their prisoner.

"Can I touch him ?" He asked.

"He's not a pet." She answered.

She felt it too though, the need for physical contact. She ran her fingers over the side of his face, feeling his cool body temperature. He wasn't ill, he wasn't dying, he was just different. Monique kissed him on the forehead and watched as his eye opened.

"You see before you, the result of generations of inbreeding." Said Ji-hu.

His English was perfect, no trace of anything Asian about it. Spider was rushing about, his reverse swan in full flight.

"Hoodies !" He yelled. "I know Ruby made sure most of your clothing has a hoody. It's important that your faces are covered when we leave."

Her T shirt had a hoody, which she quickly pulled up, stretching it to obscure most of her face.

"I'm so sorry that Max beat you." She told Ji-hu. "You're with us now and we won't let anyone else hurt you."

Fabio helped her get the skinny North Korean to his feet. Spider was sorting out the requirement for more vehicle space.

"I noticed a crappy estate car in the garage." He said. "Anyone know if it works and where the keys are ?"

"It works fine, but stinks of bad chicken takeaway." Said Imran.

"The keys are in the fruit bowl." Said Isobel.

Like a tide they left the house and spread themselves across both vehicles. Much to his obvious surprise, nearly everyone wanted to travel with Spider. His cover was blown now, they knew he was really a good guy. Now he'd have to live with the consequences of them realising that fact.

"Delmar drives, end of argument." Said Spider. "It makes sense that all three of you go back to Sarah's and we'll look after Ji-hu. Dump the car a few streets away, when you're finished with it."

Monique led, still driving Spider's car. They tore through the streets, only slowing down once they'd put a good two miles between them and the dead guy's house in Chingford. Spider was in the back, taking the top off a can of beer that he must have taken from the dead guy's fridge.

"People ! Elvis has left the building !" He yelled.

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Sophie felt about a third scared and two thirds excited. Ruby was trusting her to hijack a train, single handed and in the dark.

“This isn’t something we could do in advance.” Said Ruby. “The crews change every day.”

“I know.” She replied.

Did she have some sort of PTSD ? Her mind had been strangely relaxed since Budapest, but she’d put that down to successfully completing the mission. There had been a lot of praise from Serge and Sophie had no delusions about being something of a praise monkey. Her mind had found a calm place, simple as that. Sophie decided not to go in for too much introspection about it, at least not until the mission was over. Olga was handing her a small Makarov pistol. It was quite elderly, but reliable and Olga’s personal property.

“Don’t kill, just shoot to wound.” Said Olga. “We need a live train crew, it’s important.”

“And try not to use the gun at all.” Added Ruby. “Unless there’s no alternative.”

“I know.” She replied.

Ruby was giving Olga a worried look, one shared by Charlotte and Eugenie.

“Stop just saying ‘I know,’ to everything.” Said Eugenie. “It’s worrying.”

“But I do know ! I know the right words in Korean, where to get the train to stop and I’ve rehearsed it all in my head at least a dozen times.”

Ruby shooed everyone else away and bent down, kissing her on the cheek.

“I’m sorry you have to do this Sophie, but you’re the only one good enough at levitation.” Said Ruby.

“I know.”

They chuckled together for a few seconds, before Lau and Murad began to slide open the heavy freight car doors. She pulled Ruby towards her, to whisper in her ear.

“I know that I will eventually fall apart Ruby. I can promise you though, it won’t be today.”

“We’ll fall apart together, once we’re back in London.”

No more time to worry anyway, the doors were open, a gale now blowing her hair about. Sophie stepped out of the carriage and lifted herself up and onto the roof, hovering a few inches above the wooden centre board. They weren’t setting any speed records, but the wind was already making her eyes water. She lifted the goggles that were hanging around her neck and placed them over her eyes.

“Easy.” She muttered.

Her diminutive size was immaterial now; the wind buffeted everything, large or small. Sophie was good at keeping herself on course, resisting the forces of nature. It wasn’t flying really, but it sometimes felt like it. One night Sophie had disobeyed Baba Yaga and lifted herself to over two thousand feet over freezing snow during a particularly bad Georgian winter. That piece of defiance had almost cost her two toes from frostbite. A bit of wind on a mild night in North Korea, was hardly a challenge.

“I won’t let you down Ruby.”

Sophie moved slowly over the carriage roof and came to the extra dark area below her, the gap between carriages. No problem for her unless the train suddenly braked, but it wasn’t going to do that, they were on miles on straight and level track. She moved over the gap and onto the next carriage. A bit more haste now, the train wasn’t that far from where it needed to stop.

“What was that ?!”

Something had gone past overhead, less than three feet above her. There was nothing, she’d seen all the maps and there wasn’t even a power cable crossing the tracks. Sophie stopped and looked

into the darkness and tried to control a rising panic. What had it been ? Power cable, a tree limb, something else ? Something dangerous ? But she'd promised Ruby that her falling apart wouldn't be in North Korea. She imagined firing the huge bazooka she'd bought in Vladivostok. That helped her feel braver.

"It missed you, silly bitch." She mumbled at herself. "Get fucking moving."

Two more carriages and it became easier to trust the darkness again. The train turned slightly to the left, following the coast before turning inland. Sophie hurried, crossing the sixth carriage since leaving her friends, knowing that the diesel locomotive was next.

"Why did it have to be so dark ?"

No moon and few stars, a low covering of clouds made the darkness almost complete. Just the usual slight glow that seems to always lift the total darkness and people constantly tend to take for granted. Lighting from a nearby town, a little moonlight behind the clouds. Only those who go deep underground, ever know true stygian darkness. The slight glow was there, even in somewhere as undeveloped as the farmlands of North Korea.

Heat in front of her now, vast amounts being generated by the powerful diesel engine. Sophie drifted over the locomotive to descend on its right side, where the door was.

"Heavy sliding door, no locks." Baba Yaga had told them in Tumangang.

Sophie felt the guard rail against her back and knew she was in the right spot. She had to hurry, but forced herself to be calm. Their first impression of her had to be one of a calm and friendly face. She took hold of the door and shoved it to one side. Warm air and the smell of food hit her like a reminder of Sunday breakfast in London. She smiled at the two men, sole crew of the train.

"Hello." She said, in perfect Korean.

Sophie let the smile work for a few seconds, before closing the door behind her. It was noisy in their small home from home, the engine only a few feet away, behind a steel bulkhead. Shouting wasn't going to help her pronunciation, but she knew the script by heart.

"I am sure you have beautiful children, perhaps grandchildren." She said. "Help me for just a short time and you will see those beautiful children again."

A threat and probably unnecessary, but it had to be said. Sophie was picking up goodwill from the two men and some curiosity. Hunger too, she'd interrupted their frugal meal.

"There is a hidden branch line near Rakwon."

Fear now at the mention of the secret line to the facility. They had to know it was there though, even if they'd never used it. She smiled the way Ruby had taught her, giving the two men her complete trust and something approaching adoration.

"Keep your secrets, we have no need to talk about the branch line and where it goes. I just want you to stop for a short time, about half a mile past that branch line. I need your help, will you help me ?"

Two men of uncertain age smiling at her and bowing slightly. So far neither of them had said a word, but the older one seemed to talk for both of them.

"Yes, we will help." He said.

"Good ! In the morning, as the sun comes up, you will forget all about seeing me and my friends. It will all drift away like morning mist. Now please give one quick blast of the warning klaxon."

It was done and Ruby would know the train was going to stop where it was required to stop. Sophie noticed their meal was getting cold, just two metal plates with a few vegetables covered in a red sauce.

"Eat !" She said. "Finish your meal."

Just two chairs, a hot plate and a tiny fold up table. It wasn't much, but they seemed intent on sharing it with their new friend. The youngest man found a spare aluminium plate and spoon. She was sat down on one of their chairs, while the remainder of their meal was scraped out of a small pan. He wasn't satisfied with the amount, so their remaining chunk of bread was added to the meal. He bowed slightly as he handed it to her and Sophie remembered something Olga had often repeated on their trip home from the Karakum desert.

"Never miss the opportunity for a meal. You never know how long it might be until the next one."

The food was good, though the bread was made from something she didn't recognise. Sophie sat while the two engineers stood and watched various gauges and the track ahead. They said very little to each other, probably long used to the constant noise of whirring engine parts.

"Here !" Said the older engineer.

Sophie had just finished her meal as the train rattled over a set of point in the dark, the secret branch line heading almost due north. That way meant finding a contingent of the military, perhaps even attack helicopters. Not that way yet, but soon, when Ruby was ready.

"Half a mile and stop !" She yelled above the noise.

The men nodded at her and then muttered to each other. There was a speedometer, but she had never seen either of them look at it. The oldest seemed to be counting in his head and applied the break when he'd reached the right number.

"Here, this is where you wanted." He said.

Sophie opened the outside door, enjoying the fresh air as it hit her face. The train crew were unlikely to run away or try to move the engine until they were given permission, but she wasn't taking any chances. Ruby needed about a minute to clear everything out of the freight car, so Sophie waited for nearly ten. She hugged each man in turn.

"You can go now and forget about all this."

Sophie let herself float to the ground, hearing the clank of brakes being released. By the time she looked back, two smiling faces were closing the door to the locomotive's cab.

"You obviously made quite an impression."

Eugenie, come to find her and make sure everything was alright. The rest would be back where they'd clambered out of the freight car.

"They gave me part of their meal. I hope they really do have beautiful children."

Eugenie led the way, along the side of the track, as the train built up speed and headed inland towards Pyongyang.

"Did everything come off the train in one piece." Sophie asked.

"Yes, Ruby is currently hooking everyone up the General Dynamic comms system she bought in Russia. It looks a bit complicated, but at least we'll be able to keep in touch during the fighting."

The fighting, of course. Sophie had been so stressed out by her own part of the plan, that she'd almost forgotten it was just a prelude. Soon they'd be fighting for their lives, a very long way from home.

"There's med kits, supplies, rations and piles of ammunition." Continued Eugenie. "Ruby must think we're part pack horse."

"How long until we move north ?"

Eugenie stopped and looked to the north. A few miles away was the Research Facility, hidden in a wooded valley.

“Feel it.” Said Eugenie. “Not one anxious soldier, yet the ones like us know we’re here. It’s weird and Ruby said we’ll take advantage of the current tranquillity to get some sleep. We move out at first light.”

Sophie smiled and touched hands with Eugenie, just for a few moments.

“Did she really say tranquillity ?” Asked Sophie.

“Yes, where do these old fashioned words come from ? She’s getting as weird as Baba Yaga.”

Soon they were in the chaos of Ruby’s impromptu campsite. A group of people trying to accomplish some highly technical results, without even the occasional flashlight beam to see by. The enemy were too close, there could be no light until it was provided by the morning sun. Ruby was in the centre of it all, deep in conversation with Baba Yaga.

“If you can keep the East Sea Fleet Headquarters busy.” Said Ruby. “We can do this.”

Baba Yaga merely nodded, her angry red eyes looking south.

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A long way north of Ruby, two harmless looking orange vans were heading north. Post office vans travelling together, quite a common sight in that part of China. They’d decided on stealing two vans, after discovering most had the keys left in them overnight. Few traffic cops, almost none of the CCTV coverage that had become such a part of driving in the west. It was a society that was blind to petty crime and they were going to exploit that to the full.

“Taking two gives us a spare.” Terry had said. “Just in case one breaks down.”

“And a bit of comfort to recover from Fishitus.” Trudy had said.

That was the real reason for stealing two large vans of course, to gain a little comfort after travelling for miles in the fish truck. Both of the vans had full fuel tanks and enough range to get them quite a way into mainland China. Traffic was light on the G1 road; it always seemed light, everywhere. The main cities might have smog and traffic jams, but so far rural China had been quiet and easy to drive through. Just before midday Serge took a chance and stopped at a deserted picnic area, Terry driving in behind him. They’d found quite a bit of junk food in the vans, one western vice that the Chinese had taken to with some enthusiasm. They were all nibbling various snacks out of bags, as Serge placed the map on the table and pointed at the city all the local roads seemed to be heading for.

“Harbin !” Said Trudy. “We went there on the way in, when we were playing at being tourists. It’s a shit hole.”

“A city of three and a half million, many of them foreigners, like us.” Said Serge. “Plus I know it was the original place for Terry and his team to leave China.”

Terry was looking at the map and his men were paying more attention, hearing someone mentioning leaving China.

“It was our primary exit route.” Said Terry. “But that was before all the current trouble. The contacts were all arranged by George Polandrous and are likely to have been compromised. I like the idea of Harbin though, we could go to ground there.”

Going to ground until it all blew over was tempting, but that might mean months in China. Ruby wasn’t going to thank him for keeping three of her wunderkind in a safe house for months. She might even come looking for them.

“There is a French consulate in Harbin.” He said. “I still have a few old DGSE contacts who could help find somewhere for us to eat junk food and read Mills and Boons stories until the heat dies down.”

“Sounds good.” Said Matt. “And a nice two grand a week building up for when we get home.”

Maybe the bonus had been a mistake ? Terry's group of mercenaries were happy now, but they had no incentive to take any risks to leave China. Serge gave Trudy a smile and a slight nod. She was ready, as were the others.

"A good idea for you Terry and your team." He said. "But I think it's time to separate. I'll use my contacts to find you somewhere safe, but I need to take Ruby's people home."

That didn't go down well, Terry and his team seemed decidedly unimpressed with the idea.

"How ?" Yelled Terry. "If you can get the kids out, why not all of us ?!"

"Sounds like we're being dumped here to rot." Someone muttered.

"No way ! You guys go and we'll never get our money." Said Matt.

Serge understood how they felt. He knew that nearly all mercenaries never get as much money as they're promised. George was one of the exceptions, he always paid people their full amount due.

"George never welches on a deal, ever." Said Serge.

"We can move almost invisibly if we have to." Said Trudy. "We can't do that trick on all of you though."

No one was listening to her, they just saw a chance of losing the pay they'd been promised. Serge held her hand, the signal that things had deteriorated beyond repair. Trudy gave Terry her best smile, the one Ruby had taught her.

"Splitting up is a great idea." She said.

"You'll be far safer without us tagging along." Added Roger.

Lisa had moved herself among the mercenaries, smiling at Matt in particular.

"You know you can trust George." She said. "Two grand a week to live in luxury for a few months. Money for old rope."

It worked, Serge could feel the waves of their gifts working on him. Trudy was suddenly the most intelligent and wonderful young woman he'd ever met. All of them, all the young adults trusting him with their lives ! Serge knew he was receiving friendly fire, a backwash of the influence on the others. It still worked though, he saw what Terry's people saw.

"Yes of course." Said Terry. "Makes complete sense. We'll split up once we get into the city."

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George Polandrous wasn't scared when an immaculately dressed young woman, arrived at the downstairs reception desk. He selected that camera output to look at, when she's told the night security guy, that she had an urgent message from Sir Edwin Fox.

"Sorry, George's eyes only." She'd repeated several times.

Security was tougher now, at least six guys on all night, all of them ex-army and tough as nails. No guns of course, all his people were unarmed. Weapons would push his relationship with Foxy a bit too far. The young woman had been through the scanners, she was almost guaranteed to be unarmed.

"There are various plastic guns and new types of bullets." His head of security had told him.

"Nothing is 100% safe now, even the airlines are worried."

So George trusted the 99% almost certainty, that the woman wasn't there to kill him. He could have had her searched, but that felt inappropriate. Two of his security team were watching her, as he came out of the elevator and approached her.

"I don't work directly for Foxy; this is really a courtesy visit." She said. "Is there somewhere we can talk in private ?"

Not his office, he'd seen enough movies to know that seeing the femme fatale in private, was always a mistake. He led her across the reception area, to the comfortable leather sofas for those waiting to be seen. The waiting area was kept fairly dark at night.

"We can sit here." He said. "No one can overhear us."

Had he known it, George was sat opposite the same MI5 agent who'd grabbed Max, but he didn't know it. She was smiling at him, looking almost star struck.

"I asked to come." She said. "There have been a few problems, a few of my colleagues adding two and two together and getting six, or even seven."

It was all as clear as mud and sounded like some sort of apology. He waved at one of his guys and had them bring over two glasses and a bottle of fizzy water. She drank quite a bit of it before continuing.

"We picked up Max Krause and Sadie Miller last night. It would be a good idea if you made no further attempt to contact either of them. He was with some of your..... gifted assets and they were released into the care of Rupert Bailey."

She drank her water and actually chuckled at him.

"Mr Bailey is a very resourceful man Mr Polandrous, he surprised us all with how resourceful. There will be no further attempt to interfere with any of your people."

She seemed a little scared. What the hell had Spider and the kids done ?

"What will happen to Max and Sadie ?" He asked.

"The Americans will probably want Sadie Miller back, another of those courtesy things. As for Max ? We don't have a Guantanamo George, but there are nations out there, mostly ex-colonies, who will gladly drop someone in a hole, forever."

"Others have tried that." He said. "Max does have a knack of escaping."

"I'll warn them."

She left and George had to smile as he went back to his office. Dropped into a disgusting prison, probably somewhere in one of the old African colonies. Max would be in his element.

"I give it six months before he escapes." He muttered.

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