

## Ruby 2

### Chapter 8 - Vladivostok

**“Vladivostok of course,” she’d told them, “Putin has even made it an Enterprise Zone. It’s the closest thing you’ll find to an open city in modern day Russia.”**

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The agent of North Korean intelligence must have been carrying quite a few explosive devices. As the flames hit his jacket, he exploded into a million tiny pieces. Hot pieces, the porch he’d been hiding in burst into flames. It had been a hot dry summer and the climbing rose went up with the porch, until the whole front of the house was on fire.

“The police are quite close now.” Said Sophie.

“Well, they can hardly go to the wrong house.” Said Ruby. “We need to hurry.”

One of the burning cars in the street exploded, its petrol tank had obviously been cooking in the fires for just long enough. Ruby gave up on the front door and ran round the side of the house and through an already open side gate. There was a woman with an injured leg, lying on a perfectly manicured lawn.

“They have my husband, help him. The other lady said she’d save him !”

“I’ll do my best.” Said Ruby.

There was no need to ask where they’d gone, the back door was hanging off its hinges and on fire.

With Sophie following, she went through the door and followed the trail of scorched woodwork.

“Upstairs ! Stay behind me Sophie.”

The house was large, the sort usually turned into a dozen smaller flats. This one was still one dwelling, with three floors of small rooms and twisting corridors. Ruby found the woman’s husband on the second floor corridor. Someone had shot him in the stomach and left him to bleed to death. Sophie felt his pulse, while Ruby watched the stairs.

“Dead,” said Sophie, “and not for long, he’s still warm.”

The stairs were narrow and probably led to a converted attic. Halfway up the stairs, they heard the sound of automatic weapons fire. Like an Uzi, the same rate of fire, but a harsher sound. It seemed that the North Koreans were making their own version of half the world’s weapons.

“You’ll only annoy her by doing that.” Said Ruby.

They were in the large attic room, which stretched across the full width of the house. One of the men in expensive suits was dead, his head turned around at an impossible angle, or at least impossible to survive. Kallina was now Baba Yaga, hovering a foot off the ground and advancing on the sole surviving North Korean. He was aiming his Uzi copy at her and looking terrified.

“Do you need him alive ?” Asked Baba Yaga. “I remember you saying we needed a live one.”

“Well, we do have their boss, but it’d be nice to have this one too.”

If they’d been in Eastern Europe, the man might have known stories about the legendary Baba Yaga. Ruby had seen hardened ex Spetsnaz Russian soldiers, weep and drop their weapons. It was strange how the fairy tales they’d grown up with, still had so much hold over grown men. Obviously Baba Yaga had never visited Korea, the man had no racial memory of her. He looked terrified and fired at her.

Baba Yaga absorbed the bullets in some way, Ruby had seen her do it before. When the clip was empty, the man reached for a pocket.

“Stop him, they have grenades.” Said Ruby.

Of course she'd already know that, Kallina had already taken care of several of the men in suits. Baba Yaga rushed at the man, holding his arm and pushing her face tight up against his. She actually kissed him on the cheek.

"Be still little one and I'll let you live."

It was all too much for a man who'd probably been brought up, without even a TV in the house. All his life the North Korean would have been taught that the west was the Great Satan, the realm of everything bad. Now a mythical witch had survived a whole clip of bullets being fired at her, only to then kiss him. He passed out and collapsed onto the floor.

"I didn't do that." Said Baba Yaga.

"I think his brain just wanted a time out." Said Ruby. "Take his jacket off, they seem to carry a lot of explosives."

"There's noise in the street." Said Sophie.

Sophie went to the window that overlooked the front of the house, while the others stripped the Korean down to his boxer shorts.

"Well." Said Baba Yaga. "Unless he's got a pipe bomb stuck up his backside, he's now disarmed."

"Oh Crap !"

A picture had fallen out of his top jacket pocket. Ruby was holding up a clear picture of herself, sat outside a café in central London. She was talking to George and sipping coffee.

"This is bad." She said. "They must have had people following me for months."

"Two grey vans outside." Said Sophie. "Men with weapons getting out."

Damn, it was all happening too fast, but of course it always did. At least their captured Korean showed no signs of returning consciousness.

"Can you take all three of us back to the Lemon Tree ?" She asked.

Baba Yaga became the gorgeous Kallina again and she was shaking her head.

"I can take him and come back for you." She said. "I can manage the two of you."

She nodded her head in the direction of Sophie.

"She's only tiny."

"Hey, Hey, I'm standing right here."

Ruby could hear them now, advancing cautiously, but not saying a word. They definitely didn't seem to be ordinary cops.

"Ok, take him and come back for us." Said Ruby. "Don't forget about us !"

"I won't."

Kallina grabbed the almost naked man and vanished, leaving Ruby to listen to the progress of the armed men. No noise, cops always made lots of noise.

"Aren't they supposed to shout out 'armed police,' or something ?"

"Not these ones. Come and stand next to me Sophie."

There were grenades on the floor and probably a backup gun in the agent's jacket, but Ruby didn't want to fight the local police. They were on her side and besides, Foxy would get a bit upset about it and she still needed him to be on her side. Ruby pointed at the stairs and simply set them alight. It would make an effective barrier, for a while.

"Sorry." She said. "They can't get in, but we're trapped. Just pray that Kallina doesn't forget all about us."

Still no shouting, none of the usual cacophony that tells everyone within eight blocks that the police have arrived. Then an assault rifle is fired, the bullets coming through the flames and shredding a section on the ceiling. Oh, these guys were good, very good.

“Cuddle me.” Said Ruby. “I have an idea.”

More bullets, they’re obviously not worried about taking anyone alive. They’re putting down a pattern of fire, moving from one side of the attic to the other. They’re behaving like exterminators, removing a terrorist infestation. Ruby found herself admiring their professionalism. She thought of the Lemon Tree hotel and all her friends there. Sarah, yes Sarah would give her the right emotional anchor.

“Hold on we’re leaving !”

The world turned upside down for a second and then Ruby was in a heap with Sophie, lying in the main function room of the Lemon Tree. Kallina was some distance away, beating the crap out of the Korean she’d brought there.

“Sorry Ruby.” Said Kallina. “He was playing possum. Grabbed a bottle off a table and hit poor Spider.”

“Don’t just play with him Kallina !” Shouted Ruby. “Knock him out and tie him up with something.” It was the first successful movement to somewhere she actually wanted to go and it had left her feeling tired and abrasive. She made sure Sophie had arrived without having anything scrambled, before finding Spider.

“That’s going to leave a scar.” Said Sophie.

She’d found Spider first, sitting beside one of the tables and just about conscious. The beer bottle had broken on impact with his head and carved a deep line across his jaw.

“It’s her fault.” He said, pointing at Kallina. “She’s like a cat, bringing half dead things into the house, but this one tried to kill me.”

Ruby had to chuckle, the analogy was quite accurate. Olga came into the room and prodded his face without even saying hello.

“That’s nothing,” she said, “all that fuss over a scratch. I can stitch it, easier and safer than going to a hospital.”

“She’s got a point.” Said Ruby. “The police will probably call the local hospitals.”

“Ok, get it done Olga.” Said Spider. “Better than an eight hour wait in A&E.”

There wasn’t much wrong with him, he was still teasing Kallina about her feline habits, as Ruby left the room. They had a picture of her, the Koreans had a fucking picture ! It was serious and George might be in danger.

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Max sat on a rock while he ate a small tin of beans and fixed his eyes on a point to the north. It was the only way to walk in a straight line. People always ended up walking in circles, unless they had a good reference point. Right handed people walked in a spiral to the left and Max was right handed. It made the old Hollywood myth about travelling at night in the desert, impossible. The stars would give you a good idea of where to go, but you’d still end up going to the left all the time. Plus walking in the dark was likely to give you a broken leg from stepping into a hole in the rocks.

“Yeah, that’s as close to north as matters.” He muttered.

A boulder on a hillside locked in his mind and it was just after dawn. Max would walk until the heat became unbearable and find shelter until late afternoon. Then he’d carry on until he’d either reached the boulder or it was too dark to see it. It wasn’t rocket science, but it was the same method the Romans had used, to build all those nice straight roads. Luckily there were enough rocky outcrops and holes in the ground, to offer decent shelter from the sun.

Max wasn’t a stranger to surviving in deserts; he’d had to walk out of quite a few in his time. He’d work for anyone and tried to be politically neutral. If they had the money and he was likely to survive

the mission, he'd work for just about anyone. The walk out of the Sinai had been the toughest; only four out of twelve goods men had survived. The tunnels into the Palestinian Gaza had been increasing in number, people tunnelling out, rather than tunnelling in with supplies. It was strange and the Israeli's had asked the American's for advice. Max had a pretty good idea what was going on, but no one had asked him. Max had a bit of a phobia about giving advice for free.

Three days guarding a few private security consultants, what could go wrong ? They weren't a private corporation of course, they were pure blood CIA, as most of them tended to be. Even so, he'd taken along three of his best people and looked forward to few days of well-paid babysitting. Max was known, he had a hell of a reputation. No half-starved Palestinian was going to be daft enough to take him on, were they ?

"I really was an arsehole in those days." He muttered.

No one knew who'd taken out their two helicopters, still didn't after years of investigating. It was one of those times when everyone in the Sinai was fighting everyone else. It might even have been an American drone being targeted by an idiot. One minute they had two shiny new helicopters. A few seconds later they had two burning wrecks with dead pilots. No one saw or heard anything, it was almost like a magic trick, but two men were dead. Twelve of them had to walk to the nearest civilisation and there were a lot of pissed off tribesmen in the way. Max had led them out and only four of them had survived to drink a beer in Cairo.

Most people didn't like to dwell on times they'd been on the losing side, but Max used those times as learning experiences. He rarely did things by the book, he considered his experiences were better teachers than any book.

"Crap !"

There was a steep gully in front of him, too steep to climb out of on the other side. It meant a long diversion and only a few miles covered before bedtime. Never mind, he wasn't on anyone's clock and he had his goals. Goal six was killing Ruby Anne Mason. Only he wasn't so sure now, after two years to think about it. True Ruby had killed someone who mattered to him, but it had been in the heat of battle. After all those Friday nights playing chess with Kallina, something had changed inside him. She was wrong, he wasn't going to be like her in three hundred years time, he was like her now. He hated that! He had money in places no one would think of looking, it was still possible to start again.

"I'll probably die in this shit hole desert anyway." He muttered.

Max laughed at his own joke and carried on following the gully.

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Monique quite fancied another day at the Lemon Tree Hotel, but no one knew whether the police might arrive at any minute. There was no sign of any door to door inquiries, but there was always the risk. Plus a picture of Ruby had been found on one of their enemies and it was sensible to assume that the police might have found similar pictures on some of the dead Koreans. Ruby had quickly given them their orders and sent them away in small groups. Spider's group had the easy journey, less than half an hour's brisk walk to his part of Ealing. Monique was happy; she'd been hoping to remain with Spider and the investigation into the death of Natalie Fernandez. Fabio seemed pleased too, but he was one of those people who seemed pleased by just about anything. Rain pleased Fabio, hail pleased Fabio, extorting money from crooks pleased Fabio. His constant positive attitude annoyed her sometimes.

"I'm glad Ruby didn't split us up." She said to Spider.

He gave her a playful thump on the arm and smiled at her. The bandage across the lower part of his face and the stitches it covered, were making it difficult for him to talk.

"Me too." He mumbled.

Monique had watched Olga stitch him up with a large needle and some fairly thick thread. It appeared Olga carried such things everywhere, even to birthday parties. Olga had done a good job of pulling the skin together, but she was no plastic surgeon. Spider was going to have a nasty scar. Not that he seemed upset by that.

"It'll be good for the job." He'd muttered at her.

Sarah had told him he'd look really gnarly, whatever that meant. Ruby and her friends always seemed to use odd words, which she had to look up later on Google or an online Urban Dictionary. Monique was used to talking fluent Spider, with his punters, dosh and 'ard characters. Ruby's world was generally more gentle, but it still had its own vernacular. Spider took an unexpected turn into a corner shop, causing her to bounce off Fabio. They shrugged at each other and followed their mentor inside. Spider picked up a bottle of whisky and a six pack of strong beer.

"Liquid analgesic." He muttered at them.

Monique bought some red liquorice strips. She was becoming addicted to the stuff, even if it did 'give you the shits,' as Spider liked to tell her. Fabio bought two bars of chocolate and they followed Spider towards his house. Monique waited until they were inside and the front door closed, before asking;

"So, what's the plan boss?"

He motioned with his hand, towards the small back parlour, which doubled as his den. They'd often watched old horror movie DVDs with him in there, as an aid to them picking up the Zeitgeist. Well, that was Spider's view, their DVD evenings often ended up as beer and pizza evenings.

"Sit down, get comfortable." Said Spider.

He went into the kitchen and came back with a half pint glass, already full of ice cubes. Spider poured in a good measure of whisky and drank most of it before talking. She could see him washing it round the inside of his mouth. From his expression, it was obviously stinging.

"That's better." He said. "A decent single malt is better than penicillin and codeine, rolled into one." He drank some more and relaxed back into the old leather chair, where he sat to watch DVDs. He'd once admitted to watching Blade Runner over fifty times, which she found rather strange.

"But you must know the script by heart." She'd commented.

"Yes, of course I do."

He'd smiled and quoted a few lines to her. Humans could be quite perplexing.

"Chocolate?"

Fabio had broken a bar up into its tiny squares and he was offering it to them. Monique took two squares.

"Thank you."

"I'll probably stick to liquids for a few days." Said Spider.

All his words were slurred, but she was getting used to it.

"Mary will be here this evening and begin calling her old contacts." Said Spider. "We'll go out and interview the ones she thinks are worth seeing. Damn!"

He held his face and used the whisky as a mouth wash again. She could see blood around the edge of his glass.

"Shall we do this tomorrow?" Asked Fabio.

"Yeah, it's obviously causing pain." She added.

He grinned at them.

"I intend to get good and drunk, so we need to talk now. We're going to do this the way the police do it. Keep detailed interview notes, put a white board on the wall and go out to Epping Forest and examine the Locus in quo, as Rumpole would call it."

"The what?" Asked Fabio.

"The place it happened, the scene of the crime. What did Kallina teach you guys?"

"I'm fluent in Latin, but that phrase means nothing on its own." She said.

Spider looked deflated, she wasn't about to tell him that she had no idea who Rumpole was. That was something else to file away and look up on Google.

"Anyway." Continued Spider. "It's been a long time since her death, but a visit to the scene of the crime might throw up a few ideas. We'll go there this week."

"Is Mary moving in?" She asked. "I like her, but we are a bit short of space."

"No, nothing like that. She'll be going home every night after helping us during the day."

She knew that Spider wanted more than Mary was willing to give, but that was his business. Ruby had banned them from helping out in such matters. Trudy had once 'improved' a young man's attitude towards Sarah and that had ended very badly.

"We don't have a white board." Said Fabio.

"I know where the DIY store is, it's walkable, just." She replied.

Spider was digging through his wallet, handing her quite a few fifty pound notes.

"Brilliant, gives the whisky time to work." He Said. "Buy markers and whatever else you think we need. And food, something to eat, maybe Chinese.... Something soft that needs very little chewing."

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Serge was driving a depressed group of kids back to the airport. They'd expected a few days of fun and they'd all hoped to be accompanying Ruby on her small scale invasion of North Korea. Instead, they were all going home early and some were going to create a noisy diversion in China. It was important and it helped Foxy in some of his endeavours, it just wasn't the main mission.

"How good is this Terry?" Asked Lisa.

"I've heard a lot of good things." Said Serge. "He survived an attack by Max and an American missile strike."

It made sense, to fake a massive attack along the rail route in from Southern China. It was the way in that Kurt had been using, the route they'd be expected to use. By dumb luck, Terry was already in the area, as part of an unnecessary rescue plan for Ruby. There to save her if the visit to Jingdao Island turned out to be a disaster.

"He's dug in with six well trained mercenaries, all ex special forces." Ruby had told him.

How seven westerners had dug themselves in he'd yet to learn. It must have taken some doing, they were probably the only western looking people for miles. Terry had taken his team into China and taken them miles across country to a house near Baishan. That took skill and quite a bit of luck to pull off and they'd probably need a little of both to survive their mission.

"I'll only be five minutes." Said Trudy.

He was going to keep Lisa and Roger, which pleased him. Trudy was an addition, one of the thirteen currently being schooled in languages by Sarah. Trudy was tough, they all were. He was happy to have her on his team. He waited outside Sarah's for her to pack her things and find a passport. Her five minutes became closer to forty and he was about to go looking for her.

"Sorry, my passport wasn't where I left it."

"No problem."

Trudy shoved her case in the back and joined the others. The SUV was designed to seat eight, so they had plenty of room to travel in comfort. The kids often surprised Serge. They could feel someone thinking about them on the other side of a large city, but forgot where they'd put their passport. Except that they didn't do that, ever !

"Was your passport moved ? Are you sure Trudy ?"

"Yes, I always keep it in the bedside drawer and it was in Sarah's workroom."

Serge tried to remember Sarah's workroom, but she was always adding new bits of computer kit.

"Does she have a copier in there ?" He asked.

"Yes, a big colour copier."

Crap, he was an ex spy and Ruby should have been keeping a better eyes on things. He called Ruby, getting a message that she was unavailable. Sarah answered her phone on the second ring.

"Hi Serge."

"Might be nothing Sarah, but I think someone may have been going through the kid's things in your apartment. Maybe copying their passports. Don't get in a panic, Charlotte is pretty good at knowing if someone has been there who shouldn't be there."

"Oh Fuck !"

"Don't panic ! It might be nothing."

"Ok. I'll ask Charlotte to check my place."

Damn, but maybe it could work to their advantage. If the faces they knew were heading for Baishan, they might take their eye off the Russian route. Kurt had decided against the way in through Dandong over the famous Friendship Bridge. It was too well watched.

"Too bloody obvious." Kurt had written in his notes.

From Baishan there was a local train line, which snaked its way through towns and villages, picking up freight from various small industries on the way. The line meandered like a river, taking its own time and covering several more kilometres than the direct route. It was perfect for them though, that sauntering and quiet local line. It went through Juxingyuan and ended up in sidings by the Yalu River. From there, for someone with a little ingenuity, it was easy to cross the river into North Korea. Not that they were going anywhere near North Korea. Serge was going to join up with Terry and create a little havoc in the train yards at Juxingyuan.

"The Chinese are keeping something there, on a train." Ruby had told him. "Foxy wants it destroyed, very publicly and very noisily. He wants a huge explosion Serge. Fucking epic !"

Serge started the SUV and set the Satnav for London Heathrow.

"Burgers at the airport while we wait for our flight." He said.

"Yay."

"Are we there yet ?" Asked Trudy.

He smiled, but the joke was getting a bit old.

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Kallina put the North Koreans into the dungeon one at a time. They weren't like Max, neither of them tried to attack her. She knew some of their language, but chose not to use it. She gestured at the pile of tinned food, she pointed at the chemical toilet. There was only one bed, but it was a double and they'd survive. Their total world was now about a thousand square feet, most of it cold stone floors. They'd soon find out what everything did and develop a taste for cold baked beans.

"You're not getting my bird." She mumbled.

The small one had a few of her gifts, but they were quite crude. He attempted to look into her mind and failed. The other one, the young one, he simply sat on the floor and glared at her. They'd probably kill each other within six months and solve Ruby's dilemma.

They'd known very little, just giving Ruby a name for her nemesis. Kwan, their version of Kurt, the man who'd looked after the Korean special people for centuries. A name precious to them, too precious to be given to an outsider. Kallina had pulled the name out their heads. They were left with a problem, two prisoners who were no longer of much use.

"I know they wanted to kill us." Said Ruby. "But it seems wrong to kill them in cold blood."

"I have a place." Kallina had told her.

Max wouldn't need it. One way or another, Max Krause would never be returning to his prison.

"Bad, bad place !"

She pointed at the hole in the ground, the one Max had used as an escape route of last resort.

Kallina put pictures into their heads of dirty sewers, feeling their waves of disgust in response. It had taken Max two years to become desperate enough to drop down that hole, the new prisoners might never have the courage.

They had enough food to last for a very long time and bottled water. She looked at their supplies, a whole room full of tins, jars, bottles and new clothing still in wrappers. There was far too much for just Max, she'd never audited his stores and bought far too many things. If she forgot all about them for a year, they had enough food.

"You're both skinny, the clothing will fit." She muttered.

The bird though, it needed a home and everyone was travelling round the world. Actually not quite everyone, Spider was remaining in London. Yes, he'd do nicely. The climate in London might be a bit cold and damp, but the creature would adapt. Max had left everything to do with the bird in the bag she'd brought it in. Kallina picked it up and took a firm hold of the stand the cage hung from.

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Olga was left to look after the Lemon Tree Hotel and those still there. It made sense, she was human, had a genuine passport in her own name and a valid entry visa for the UK. Not that she thought the police were likely to bang on the door. She'd been listening to the radio in the kitchen and the news was reporting a 'Drug related,' raid by the police in Ealing. The number of dead and the bizarre nature of some of those deaths, had been brushed over.

"Drug related my arse." She said.

"At least they're not blaming it on Islamists." Said Imran.

"Or a loner with mental health issues." Added Isobel.

The band had left just after breakfast, though the Strippergram guys had to be thrown out. It seemed that a comfortable bed and unlimited booze was too good to give up lightly. Olga had shoved them out of the front door and watched two guys with hangovers and wearing American Football uniforms, trying to remember where they'd parked their car. Kallina had taken Jalil home, before going off on her own errands. For some reason Ruby had decided to take Murad with her, as part of her team. Olga was left with four fairly fed up members of the thirteen.

Ruby had made a few last minute adjustments; Imran and Isobel were going to be staying at Sarah's apartment, as a potential backup for the main group. Patrick and Delmar were to do the same thing at Serge's home near Marseille. As for Kallina's house in Georgia ? That was fairly well hidden by the tricks of Baba Yaga and as Ruby had said;

"I pity anyone crazy enough to take on Baba Yaga."



They were all sat near her and looking miserable. They'd wanted to see action, not be house sitters. Olga couldn't even show her excitement about Vladivostok. She'd been asked her opinion about the best place to enter the Russian rail network.

"Vladivostok of course," she'd told them, "Putin has even made it an Enterprise Zone. It's the closest thing you'll find to an open city in modern day Russia."

No one had looked that impressed, though Kallina had backed her up.

"Vladivostok would mean we could move about openly." Kallina had said. "Officially there is no direct link to anywhere further than Tumangang. In reality, they simply change over to a Korean locomotive and crew. Then the train carries on all the way to Pyongyang. Not that we want to go that far."

Olga had still been the only one excited by the idea of Vladivostok, but then again, it had been her home town for quite a few years. End of the Trans-Siberian railway, population of just under six hundred thousand. To Olga it was boom town.

"I know the city." She'd told them. "I have contacts, we can get any weapons you want, anything! We'd be crazy to think of anywhere else."

She'd actually done a little dance when Ruby had agreed. They were going to Vladivostok and she had no one to celebrate with.

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Charlotte had borrowed Olga's car, they could all drive like experts after just a few lessons. The idea was to get everyone going to Korea, to Ruby's flat in Hackney. It appeared Ruby was a little superstitious.

"There is my place out in the country, but we left from Hackney before and we all came back alive." There was going to be a short detour though, so that Charlotte could examine Sarah's apartment for unlawful entry.

"Do you want my help?" Asked Eugenie.

"No stay in the car, this is something I do best on my own."

Sarah was there to open the door and then they both stepped into her flat.

"First floor is good." Said Charlotte. "We can be pretty sure they came in through the door."

"But I have an alarm and dead locks!"

"Truth is Sarah, that your alarm and locks might put off kids looking for TVs to steal, but a professional would be barely slowed down."

Charlotte picked up several thought residues. Serge, Ruby, even Robert's. A lot of people had been through the front door of that apartment and they'd all left a little of their thoughts behind them.

The trick was filtering out the bad guy from the background noise.

"Got him!" She said. "Guy in his thirties, feeling worried. Second time he's been here, you need to invest in a serious set of locks."

Now she had him, she wasn't going to lose him. Down the hallway and he'd stopped for a few seconds.

"He stopped here and called out, saying he'd found the door open. Obviously covering his backside in case someone was home."

"Crap, was this guy armed?" Asked Sarah.

"No. I'm not sensing a spy or a cop, it's weird."

Charlotte followed his trail, as he'd rooted through drawers and then had the nerve to use Sarah's copier.

“Passports, driving licences, he copied the lot.” Said Charlotte. “I’m guessing that he simply forgot to replace Trudy’s passport.”

“Why though, who’s he working for ?”

“Don’t know yet.”

Charlotte followed the man as though he was still there. He’d gone through everything in Sarah’s dressing table, even picking up a clockwork musical box. Charlotte carefully picked it up by the edges.

“His prints are on this.” She said. “Get Imran to call George while we’re away, his contacts will give you a name within twenty four hours.”

“Not Foxy ?”

“A bit of a sledge hammer and walnut situation. George will enjoy doing it, keeps him in the loop.”

Charlotte walked right through every room again, finding curiosity but no threat from the intruder.

“Change the locks for something hellishly expensive and you’ll be fine.” Said Charlotte. “Your apartment is quite safe for Imran and Isobel to use.”

Sarah was glancing around, as if expecting a burglar to fly out of a cupboard.

“Any idea who he was ?” She asked.

“I could make a guess, but I might be wrong.”

“Tell me !”

“A private investigator, a good one. He could be employed by anyone, but no one who means to kill you. More likely something financial. Do you owe anyone a large sum of money ?”

Sarah shook her head at her. It would have to remain a mystery, until George could put a name to the fingerprints.

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Ruby had driven out to Kent, to see Sir Edwin Fox, or Foxy as they all knew him. A link with British intelligence wasn’t just useful, it was essential. Only Foxy had been able to expunge Ruby’s death from official records, only Foxy could have taken them off an American list of known terrorists.

Others of their kind had died because they lacked any link to the authorities. Foxy wanted favours in return, that was how things worked.

Ruby smiled at Lilly and drank her tea. A lot of military types had gone into see Foxy, she’d obviously stirred things up a bit.

“Sir Gerald has still to arrive.” Said Lilly. “Then they’ll all be here.”

Another sir, that was the third knight of the realm that had signed in for the meeting. Military honours too, no getting a knighthood for dropping a political party a few million. It was nice to be sat on the sofa, watching them all arrive.

“More tea ?” Asked Lilly.

“Yes please.”

Foxy had asked her to blow up several square kilometres of China and she’d refused, until he’d given her details and reasons. It was a relatively under populated region, but even so, there would be civilian casualties. She’d end up doing the job for him, they both knew that. Actually Terry and Serge would do the deed. Ruby was just asserting her independence, throwing up a few boundaries. Her phone rang, Spider wanting her.

“You just caught me.” She said. “The meeting starts soon.”

“Do you know anything about a bird being put in my place ?” Spider asked. “Big job, green plumage. Seemed to arrive out of nowhere while everyone was out.”

She vaguely remembered Kallina talking about a pet she'd bought for Max, a large bird in a cage. She'd been looking for a new home for the creature.

"Sorry Spider, I think Kallina decided to give it to you. I'll get her to take it away."

She could hear bird call, a deep mournful sound and then Monique laughing.

"No, we like it. It tried to stab Monique with its beak, but apart from that, we all love it."

"It makes really cool noises." Added Monique. "Really sinister."

It looked like Baba Yaga had chosen the perfect home for her unwanted pet.

"Can you look after it properly?"

"Yeah it came with pages of instructions. We'll keep it. Does it have a name?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"I want to call him Crow." Yelled Monique.

"Sounds fine." Said Ruby

Ruby turned her phone to silent after the call, just in time to see Sarah trying to reach her. Oh no, she wasn't going to have a bout of Sarah's neurosis, not just before a big meeting. Another serious looking man had gone in, probably Sir Gerald. Lilly's intercom buzzed.

"You can go in now Ruby."

~ ~

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