

Ruby 2

Chapter 11 - Kwan

“Max, listen to me. If you start disposing of North Korean agents, our own side will come after us.”

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Ryöm Kwan had a beautiful home by North Korean standards, he lived well. The village was still on the same quiet hillside where Kwan had built the first house in the village. It had been built from the local Japanese Pine, which still covered the local hills. That house had been rebuilt many times, over the several hundred years since the village had existed. No one had thought of communism then, or whatever ideology it was that his masters in Pyongyang practised. They'd begun with three strangely gifted children and himself and now the village held over a two hundred of his kind. Inbreeding had been their downfall really, it had diluted the gifts, rather than enhancing them. His wife was hovering by his study door, a sure sign that bad news had arrived on the helicopter, which had just landed.

“Tell me Nari.” He said. “Who has turned up to ruin our lives today ?”

He spoke freely, if anyone other than his wife was within earshot, he'd have known it. He now grudgingly accepted that he didn't have Ruby's level of abilities, but he was still the most powerful in the village. Nari was related to him of course, everyone in the village shared much too much of their genetic structure. They had been worried that inbreeding might create monsters, but it had created progeny with watered down gifts and fertility problems. His wife was heavily pregnant, almost at full term. His child would soon be the first baby to be born in the village for some time.

“The admiral is here.” She answered. “With three men from Pyongyang.”

“Then I'd better go and see them.”

The admiral never travelled without an entourage, so his office in the research facility would be full of dull men in uniforms. If only they'd leave him alone to get on with things ! Nari was young and scared, he hugged her and kissed her before leaving. She was barely eighteen and he'd felt guilty about marrying her, even if she did view it as an honour. They needed children though, especially his children. Children from the purest member of their gene pool. If the marriage had produced no issue within the year, he'd have needed to find a new wife.

“Be careful my love.” She called after him. “Think before you speak.”

“I will my dear, promise.”

He had a small garden at the front of his house and a car was parked in front of it. His car, the official car which he rarely used. His driver saluted and opened the back door, as Kwan walked straight past him. The admiral would have to wait the few minutes it would take him to walk to the facility, he needed to think. His driver had been given to him by the military and was probably reporting back every time he went for a pee. Kwan ignored the man's protests and carried on walking towards the East Sea Fleet – Research Facility. The East Sea Fleet main base was only a few miles away, but the research facility had nothing to do with anything even vaguely nautical.

“Sir ! Sir !”

“My wife will make you some tea.” He shouted back at his driver.

Damn the man, he needed to be out in the fresh air, not stuck in the back of an official car. He could see the huge helicopter, at the heliport to the north of the facility. The North Korean Navy boasted of having sixty thousand men and over eight hundred craft. A good half of them were permanently based just three miles away. It had been just a safe anchorage for fishing boats when the village was

young, now it felt like having thirty thousand jailers. They could use their attack helicopters to protect the facility, being there in a matter of minutes. To Kwan, they always felt as though they were there to keep his people under control. There was no railway branch line on any map, yet several freight cars had arrived during the night, he could see them, hidden under camouflage netting. The rail line went through Rasan and Sepori, before their private line left the main railway, just before Rakwon. The west believed they were an experimental research facility for torpedoes, or at least they had for three decades. Now Ruby knew the real nature of their facility and the Americans couldn't be far behind her.

"Good morning Kwan."

"Good morning."

An old lady, one of his growing group of elderly residents of the village. Take the elderly, the young and the sick out of the numbers and he probably had no more than two hundred people to put in the field against Ruby Mason and her thirteen. He knew them all well, Ruby's gifted ones. There had been so many reports on them from the State Security Department of North Korea. Kwan had known it was a mistake to send his own people to Europe to help, two had died and Ruby would know they weren't as strong as her thirteen. His gifted people were numerous enough to win any battle, but it would be a Pyrrhic victory at best. Few would survive and they wouldn't be numerous enough to ensure the survival of his..... Species. The Das Geheimnis, the mystery, the unknown, as they'd been labelled by various European security organisations.

Ryöm Kwan had to show his pass to the guards and put his index finger on the scanner, no one was exempt from security checks. Once in the main building, he walked to his own office, knowing the fleet admiral would be annoyed at having to wait for him to arrive. Kwan had been right; the admiral was accompanied by no less than eight armed guards, which accounted for the size of the helicopter. Three men in expensive suits had also arrived with the admiral, the uniform of field operatives of the State Security Department. Everything was about status in the North Korean military; they hadn't had a real enemy to fight for decades. Kwan bowed towards the admiral.

"Taejang." He said.

Kwan knew the admiral's name, yet only ever referred to him by his rank of Taejang, Fleet Admiral of the East Sea Fleet. There was a Vice Marshall of the Navy above the fleet admiral on the hierarchical ladder and the Marshall of the Navy above him. To Kwan though, the fleet admiral was his main contact with his masters, the North Korean military. The man sat at his desk could make life pleasant for the village, or very difficult. Sometimes life could be made unpleasant, if the military didn't get what they wanted. Today the admiral was smiling, they wanted something.

"Kwan, it's good to see you looking so well. I don't get to visit the village often enough. Always so quiet here, the people so polite."

Kwan bowed again, it was expected of him. They were treated well, on the whole. No empty bellies in the village and the power supply was reliable. There had been a period, long ago, when they'd actually dissected one of his people. That period had been mercifully short, the period of paranoia and curiosity. Now the North Korean's treated them like the valuable asset they were. He'd even been invited to Pyongyang when the western powers began to persecute and kill their own gifted people. It had been his one and only meeting with the great leader, Kim Il-sung himself.

"The west seems to be going through a period of insanity. Your people will always be welcome in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. It is important to me that you know that."

Kim Il-sung had actually hugged him and promised that his people would never be hunted down, as they were in the western democracies. That day changed quite a few things for Kwan and the village.

They no longer planned to escape to the west; the west obviously didn't want them. For the first time in hundreds of years Kwan had felt secure, the great leader himself had promised the village would be safe. It came at a price though; the research facility hadn't been his idea, or the old Karakum technology they were working on.

"If you can stay for lunch, my wife is an excellent cook." Said Kwan.

"Alas I am needed elsewhere." Said the admiral. "I am here to ask for two more of your people, to assist with matters in the west."

"We are so few Taejang and the last two were killed."

The men in suits were looking awkward and a little nervous. Rumours from the capital reached the village, often with surprising speed. The man who had controlled field operations in the west had gone, presumed executed. The west held long investigations into military blunders and then allowed the tabloids to hang the incompetent in public. In North Korea there were no tabloids or investigations and the hangings were very real. It pleased Kwan that losing two of his gifted people, had brought down the wrath of the current great leader. Those that used his people, had to know there were consequences for allowing them to be harmed.

"They will be better protected now." Said the admiral. "They can remain in their hotel rooms most of the time, but we need them in the west. Only they can feel out others of their kind."

Kwan bowed once more, there was no refusing an order from the Fleet Admiral. He'd once refused a direct order and they'd used torture until his attitude had been adjusted. Not torture on him, he could have handled that. They'd chosen one of his daughters to receive the pain that should have been his. Once he'd said yes to their demands, life went back to being quite pleasant in the village.

"It will be as you ask Taejang." He said. "How long do I have to prepare them?"

"Three days, one for London and one for Marseille."

"They will be ready."

They'd never be ready to act like locals in that time, but they didn't have to. They could be taught a language perfectly in less than twelve hours and a great deal of the local zeitgeist. If they messed up when dealing with someone in London or Marseille? They'd just stepped off the plane as tourists from somewhere in Asia, they were almost expected to be a little..... Alien. The admiral was watching him, looking at his expression.

"Clear the room." Said the Taejang. "I wish to have a private word with the Director of the Research Facility."

His guards didn't move, their standing orders were to stay close to the admiral and protect him with their own lives, if need be.

"Go!" He shouted. "Back to the helicopter, all of you."

Reluctantly they left and for the first time, Kwan was alone with the man who held his life and that of his people, in his hands.

"Kwan, I can read you almost as well as you can read me."

He had to grin at him, there were rules about being alone with any of the villagers and the admiral had just broken that rule. Keys for various personal codes and ciphers were in the admiral's head and he could easily dig them out, if he wanted to. Trust was important though, being alone with him showed trust and Kwan wasn't about to betray it.

"I don't want any more of my people to die." Said Kwan. "Especially abroad and away from anyone they know."

"The new man in charge of intelligence about the west will be more careful than the last, he's aware of the price of failure. And besides there is also some good news."

“Good news is always welcome.”

Even alone, it was bad manners to ask what the news was, the admiral had to offer the information at his own pace. As with foreign monarchs, a direct question was bad etiquette and frowned upon.

“There is news about Ruby Mason and her terrorist network. It appears they are heading for China.”

“I doubt that very much Taejang.”

“It is the official news from Pyongyang and therefore, must be true.”

The admiral was smiling at him; privacy meant a rare moment of honest thought.

“I too think that activities in China are a deliberate diversion. There are thousands of men at the East Sea Fleet base Kwan, all on full alert. If she comes, they can all be here within minutes.”

“They can’t stop her ! You saw pictures of Jingdao Island, after she’d been there.”

“Pahh, our old allies have grown soft ! If Ruby comes to Rakwon, she will die.”

“I’m sure you’re right Taejang.”

The admiral had only ever seen Kwan and his people, the tame members of Das Geheimnis, who’d been rendered safe by centuries of living quietly in the village. Ruby and her thirteen weren’t tame and the admiral was going to discover that fact, when it was too late.

“I must go now Kwan. I’ll arrange for a helicopter to arrive in three days. Have your two operatives prepared and ready to leave.”

“It will be done. Next time you must stay for lunch, Nari cooks a superb Bulgogi.”

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Kallina’s arrival at the Hyundai Hotel was unexpected, but that was quite normal. Luckily her Baba Yaga persona didn’t seem to be likely to surface, as she checked into the hotel and asked for Ruby’s room number. Of course the receptionist refused to tell her, but rang Ruby’s room to see if she knew a Kallina Kostova. Still wet from a shower, she answered in the affirmative, though the surname was new. Ruby put on a dressing gown and opened the door to her room.

“Couldn’t you just appear ?” She asked. “Preferably with fresh croissants and coffee.”

“I needed to be officially here Ruby. It’s the day I train you all to be North Koreans.”

Crap ! She did remember Kallina mentioning that and it was important. Recent events had driven it from her mind and she’d only had a couple of hours of decent sleep.

“Of course, I remember.” She said. “I’ll call room service, what do you fancy for breakfast ?”

“Those croissants and coffee sounds good.”

As Ruby dressed, Constanze appeared and rubbed against her legs. She hadn’t even seen Kallina go and fetch her elderly cat.

“She missed you.” Said Kallina. “I’ll hide her in the bathroom when they arrive with breakfast.”

Ruby was actually pleased to see Constanze, picking her up and cuddling her. Like Kallina, she smelt of Chanel No 5.

“Good to see you Constanze, just don’t pee in a corner.”

“She’s very well behaved.”

Ruby waited for breakfast to arrive, before talking about the previous night’s events. Kallina listened intently to the story, frowning throughout much of it.

“You’re sure nothing was left of the body ?” She asked.

“Certain as I can be, the fire was intense enough to crack reinforced concrete.”

Her breakfast guest was still frowning and looking thoughtful.

“You’d be amazed what they can find with modern techniques.” Said Kallina. “I doubt that Charlotte is on any international police database though. I don’t think any serious harm has been done.”

“They adjust so well to things.” Said Ruby. “Sophie seemed to think it was a new super power or something. Do you think they all have that gift ? Are we all immortal ?”

“No ! Remember that we found twenty gifted children. Seven were killed, no resurrection, no replication, just dead.”

“How did they die ?”

“We trusted the wrong people.”

Kallina still looked like a young blonde Russian, but her eyes now looked their full age. She usually claimed to have been born in seventeen hundred and two, but also claimed to have been around much longer. With her mental confusion, it was unlikely that even she knew her true age.

“Sorry.” Said Ruby. “I didn’t intend to bring up painful memories.”

“You need to know they can die. Some were killed by bullets, others by explosions. The French even dissected one child and sent her organs to different research facilities, to be examined. I think they hoped to find the secret of our gifts, probably to use as weapons.”

“I’ve already told them that they mustn’t assume they’re all capable of Charlotte’s trick.”

“Our children died young Ruby, far too young. They may have developed the ability to replicate themselves as they grew older, or because we kept them asleep for so long. To be honest, we’ll never really know. The children are yours now, but I will offer you advice, if you’d like it ?”

Ruby topped up their coffee and nodded at Kallina.

“I do appreciate you not being a back seat driver for the last two years, but yes, I’d appreciate your advice.”

“Tell them to treat replication as they would the air bag in a car. Something that they pray will work when they need it, but really hope they’ll never actually need to use.”

“That sounds perfect, I’ll drill that into them. I’d better call them all and get them here for the training session.”

Ruby used the phone in her room, to summon the others for a lesson on ‘How to look and feel like a citizen of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.’

“Yay Korean boot camp !” Sophie yelled down the phone at her.

They were keen, which was good, blending in was important. Ruby watched Kallina pour some milk into a saucer and give it to her cat. On a good day Kallina was the wisest person she knew, but on a bad day ! Baba Yaga could be their most powerful weapon, or she might forget all about Ruby and the kids for three months. It was sad, but Kallina was too unstable to rely on.

“I’ll ask one of the kids to go out for cat food.” Said Ruby.

“No need.”

Kallina dug about in her bag and pulled out a dented tin of Tuna. Ruby would have sworn that some sand fell off the tin, as she brought it out of her expensive handbag.

“Max didn’t need it anymore.” Said Kallina.

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The Westin Changbaishan Resort had given them an opportunity for some pampering and much needed rest and recreation. Serge knew it was time to meet up with Terry and his team and begin heading south. There was no contact with Ruby, they’d deliberately split up into two independent cells.

“No contact Ruby, nothing to link us to you.” He’d told her. “In case the worst happens.”

But the worst mustn’t happen ! There was no way he was going back to Ruby, to tell her that one of her precious children had died in southern China. He knew the timing, Ruby would have her weapons by now and be getting ready to leave Vladivostok. That meant he’d need to be moving too.

“We’ll find a taxi.” He told them. “I don’t want to book it through the hotel.”

It was the time for paranoia, the time to assume they were being followed everywhere. In truth, none of the kids had picked up any interest in them, above the usual curiosity about western tourists.

“They can’t follow everyone.” Trudy remarked.

“We’d feel the attention of anyone tailing us.” Added Lisa.

They probably would, but Serge wasn’t taking any chances.

“Trust me,” he said, “I used to do this for a living. To stay safe, we must assume that everyone we meet might be an agent of the Ministry of State Security.”

All three of them nodded at him. He liked the way they respected his wisdom in such things, but it did put him under pressure. They left by the main doors of the hotel and picked up a taxi that had just dropped someone off. Anywhere else in the world and the taxi driver would have loved a fare back into town. In China it obviously confused the hell out of him.

“He says he only has permission to pick up from the airport.” Said Roger.

Serge dug about in his wallet and pulled out half of the Chinese money he had. It was about two thousand five hundred Yuan, just under three hundred pounds.

“Tell him we’re in a hurry to meet someone.” Said Serge. “Tell him the money is his, if he’ll take us to the park on Hongqi Street.”

The taxi driver took the money and inspected it, before nodding at Roger and driving away from the hotel. Once they were on the road, he grinned at them and became quite talkative.

“He loves us,” said Roger, “he’ll keep quiet because he’d be in trouble for picking up a fare out of his area.”

“And he knows a pretty young woman.” Added Trudy. “If you’re ever looking for company.”

“God bless entrepreneurs.” Said Serge.

He accepted a business card from their new friend and settled back in the rear of the taxi. It took longer than he’d expected to reach the park, he just hoped the contact would wait. Their driver dropped them off in front of the Xinjiu Bookstore, pointing at the trees behind the store.

“He says this is as close as he can get to the park.” Said Roger.

They left the taxi and looked in the bookstore window until he’d driven away. Serge wasn’t in the mood to trust anyone, especially a taxi driver who moonlighted as a pimp. They looked at the neat rows of books for ten minutes. Trudy even noticed a Chinese language version of a Harry Potter book.

“Well ? Are your super senses picking up a tail ?” Asked Serge.

The kids muttered at each other and Lisa gave their answer.

“No Serge.” She said. “No one here gives a crap about us..... though one old lady is wondering why we’ve been waiting here for so long.”

They entered the park, which was a decent size with a separate area for young children. That was where they were going, where mothers pushed kids on swings and their contact could sit and wait for them. Serge stopped in the trees, as he saw a woman stand up and walk away from them. It was her, their contact, carrying a bright green shopping bag.

“Someone is interested in her, two of them.” Said Lisa.

“Where ?”

“There Serge, towards the gate next to the ATM.”

He saw them, trying to look like part of the usual park community and failing badly.

“There will be one, maybe two in a car too.” He said. “Can you spot them ?”

“Tricky !” Said Trudy. “If I go and distract the two we know about. They will think about me.”

“Then we can spot them and take care of them.” Added Roger.

“Fine, but nothing violent.”

“We know !” Said Trudy and Lisa at the same time.

Trudy walked towards the two men at a decent pace, which was just as well. Their contact had obviously realised something was wrong. Serge was supposed to follow her out of the park and he hadn't. She was standing under a tree near the north gate, trying not to stare in their direction. Crap ! If she decided to run, he'd have to arrange another contact time via London. That would screw up the timings to act as a diversion for Ruby.

“They like Trudy.” Said Roger.

“I have them, two in a parked car.” Said Lisa.

They left him and Serge was on his own, looking at a park full of young children. There might not be the paedophile paranoia there was in the west, but someone would wonder why he was there. He began to slowly walk toward their contact. He saw Lisa approach a red four door Honda. Trudy was already walking in the same direction as him and he'd reached the woman with the green bag, before the others joined him.

“You had a tail.” He said. “Two on foot and two in a car. My people took care of them.”

“You didn't?”

Perfect English with almost a posh accent.

“No, they'll just be confused or asleep for a while.”

“I have a van over the road, you'll need to go in the back.”

They were at her van before Roger and Lisa returned and Lisa wasn't looking happy.

“One is fast asleep.” Said Roger. “The other might be a problem.”

“I stopped his heart.” Said Lisa.

Their contact was looking horrified. It crossed Serge's mind that she might well know nothing about Das Geheimnis and think they were a gang of psychopaths.

“I didn't know you could do that.” He said.

“Neither did I ! It was an accident Serge, I'm sorry.”

“Will it look like natural causes ?”

They were both nodding at him.

“What about your guys Trudy ?”

“Both seriously confused and sat on the grass. They'll be like that for at least an hour.”

“Fine, no fuss now, we'll talk later. Get in the back of the van.”

Serge sat on the floor of the van with his back against the wall. Thoughts of dashboard cameras were filling his head, along with any CCTV in the park. They also had to return and check out of the hotel at some stage. Doing a runner from a prestigious hotel chain, would paint an instant target on their backs. Then there was their driver, examining him in the rear view mirror.

“I don't know your name ?” He asked.

“That's right, you don't.”

Great, a size ten attitude ! Lisa was quietly crying and the other two were looking dejected. Killing someone was never easy, especially if was unintended. As to their contact ? She'd have to leave town with them now and probably realised it. Hence the attitude.

“Rosy.” She said. “My name is Rosy, Rosy Li.”

He had to chuckle. He just hoped she'd meet Spider one day, he'd enjoy teasing her for weeks.

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While the teams in China and Russia enjoyed being pampered by five star hotels, Spider and his two helpers were staying at the Carousel bed and breakfast in Manchester. Spider had accidentally bumped against a vase of flowers on a table in the hallway. Not only were the flowers plastic and dusty, their plastic vase didn't move. It was actually nailed to the table. It was that kind of B & B, the kind where the owners nailed vases to tables. Hot water was available for fifteen minutes at around seven in the morning and breakfast was the worst fry-up he'd ever eaten. Monique and Fabio were picking at some cold toast, with little enthusiasm.

"There's an odd smell in my toilet." Said Monique.

"I know it's a bit grim, but we're only here for three nights." He replied.

It was awful, maybe he had picked somewhere a bit too downmarket? There were one or two men who looked like commercial travellers, but most of the breakfast crowd looked like permanent residents. One woman had even arrived in her dressing gown and slippers.

"I had to shower in cold water." Said Fabio.

"Think of the things we can do with the money we've saved."

Neither of them looked impressed. He'd paid extra for three rooms with private facilities, the communal bathrooms were worse than he'd put up with in Afghanistan.

"We'll hire a decent car to use." Said Spider. "Something really impressive."

It was his last bid to cheer them up and it would add a bit of gravitas, turning up in an expensive car.

"Can I drive?" Asked Monique.

"Have you got a driving licence yet?"

More dejected looks, more picking at cold toast and staring at the lady in her slippers. He'd mention it to Ruby, they all needed driving licenses, even bent ones would do.

"She drives really well." Added Fabio.

"Fine, you can drive." Said Spider. "No speeding though!"

"I won't."

They were happy, it didn't take much to cheer them up. The B & B had been a mistake, but it would do. Spider put a manilla folder on the table and took them through it, even though the kids knew it all by heart.

"We're seeing a lady who went by the name of Jasmine today." He said. "You both know her background and real name. First though we need to hire a car. What do you fancy?"

"Top of the range BMW." Said Monique.

Fabio was nodding furiously at her. *Crap!* The three grand wasn't going to last as long as he'd hoped. Still, if it made them happy. Spider really was feeling guilty about booking into the Carousel B & B.

"Ewww she's put her false teeth on the table." Whispered Monique.

"Right! Get what you need from your rooms and we'll meet up in reception in ten minutes."

There was a TV lounge at the Carousel, though no one was using it. A large old Sony Trinitron was on a stand in the corner, a TV too heavy for anyone to pick up and run off with. The picture on the set was still clear though and it showed the current Secretary of State for Defence, who had just resigned. Spider recognised one of the men who'd helped Rob Newsmith dump a body in Epping Forest.

"It's him." Said Fabio.

"Shush, wait until we're outside."

The volume was down low on the old TV, but a scrolling bar was giving the facts. He'd resigned to concentrate more on his philanthropic projects. It sounded very noble, but Spider knew the real

reason. Their client was making use of the information they'd collected, the wheels were beginning to turn.

"The millstones of the gods grind late, but they grind fine." He muttered.

"Where is that from ?" Asked Fabio.

"Usually attributed to the Sibylline Oracles." Answered Monique.

"Nahh, just something my mum used to say." Said Spider

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Kallina watched Ruby's group, as they kept their eyes to the ground and slouched across the room. She'd already given them advice on how to dress to conceal western features. Most of it was attitude now, how they felt inside.

"You've had a lifetime of hunger." She said. "Feel it !"

They were good, especially Sophie. She was tiny and managed to convey several generations of poor nutrition in every footstep.

"Lau, you're still looking a bit haughty." She said. "Think beaten ! Think of your children having no future. Imagine you have a stone in your shoe, which makes every step agony. That will help."

It did, Lau began to hunch up, a look of despair on his face. There was still a problem though, a huge one. She beckoned Ruby to join her.

"I didn't tell everyone to stop !" Yelled Kallina. "Carry on."

She took Ruby out of earshot, whispering what needed to be said.

"You have a problem with Murad." She said. "Do you need him with you ?"

"Yes, I have a feeling that he will be essential to the mission."

Kallina watched him trying to look Korean, with his tanned skin and the features that screamed of the Middle East.

"He's your oldest male." She said. "Anyone official will home in on him and ignore Lau for being young and everyone else..... well, for being female. The person everyone will want to talk to is the one person you need to keep hidden. It won't do Ruby, it won't do."

"You're right, let me think for a moment."

They watched for a minute or so, as the kids marched up and down the room, trying to look like the down trodden citizens of North Korea. Olga was doing quite well, though her blonde hair would need trimming and covering.

"Murad." Said Ruby. "Imagine you have a walking stick..... Actually no, an old homemade crutch that goes under your right shoulder, making you hunch up."

He was good at it, even though the lack of an actually crutch wasn't helping him.

"I can get him a crutch." Said Ruby. "What do you think ?"

"Good, but he needs a helper. How about Sophie ?"

"Sophie, help him." Said Ruby. "He's your much loved great grandfather. He's older than Methuselah and you have to help him walk. Get a good hold on his left arm."

They trudged up and down, looking like a very old man being helped by a doting child.

"You can only speak in grunts Murad." Added Ruby. "Sophie will have to speak for you."

"You're still looking haughty Lau !" Shouted Kallina. "I can break a couple of your toes, if it helps you get in character ?"

"No, I'm fine."

"You will have to change trains and you will meet local officials." Said Kallina. " They will petty local bureaucrats with nothing better to do that give you a hard time. You must appear and sound humble, completely submissive to authority. Time for a little role play."

She walked among them, satisfied that they'd all look like a group of local farm workers, from a distance. She still had a few tricks to change their appearance, for close up scrutiny.

"Who is that you're helping Sophie?"

"My grandfather.... He's unwell and we're taking him to see a doctor."

"Good, but your accent sounds more Pyongyang than rural farmer.... Work on it, it matters."

She barged into Lau and was pleased that he moved away and apologised. He was learning, they all were.

"Why are you here?" She shouted at him.

"We are taking a sick elder to see a doctor."

"Good, very good, perfect accent. Always ask Ruby for the name of a local village in case you're asked where the doctor lives. You don't need official permission to travel locally."

She walked them up and down for another hour, bellowing questions at them and subjecting them to the sort of low level bullying that could expect to receive. Eventually she let them sit down and rest.

"Last piece of bad news." She said. "Brunettes only on this trip. No red heads, no platinum blondes. Trim your hair back to a sensible length and then get out the black hair dye."

"Can't I wear a wig?" Asked Sarah.

"A flash of blonde hair could mean failure. Are you willing to risk that?"

"No, I'll cut and dye my hair."

It was easier after training them to be humble and submissive. If she'd mentioned cutting their hair earlier, there would have been a lot more complaints.

"Clothing is easy." She told them. "Being citizen of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is all about what's in your heads. Keep in character until you get to your destination. Never walk like or behave like confident westerners..... Ever! Even if you're alone. I will meet you in the rail yards at Tumangang, with a little Baba Yaga magic. Even you will think you're North Koreans if you look in the mirror. Now have something to eat, we're practising all this again after lunch."

They groaned and poor Eugenie was still looking sadly at her gorgeous locks of red hair. Kallina felt a little like a wicked aunty, but it had to be done.

"Don't forget meeting us at Tumangang." Said Ruby.

"I won't, I promise. I do know that I get confused, but this is for the precious children. I won't forget."

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Serge had expected a university campus of some kind, but Rosy parked the van at the rear of what looked like a large private school. She came round to the rear of the vehicle and opened the doors for them to get out.

"How long do you think I have until they arrive to arrest me?" She asked.

Straight to the point, he liked that. It was something he'd been mulling over all the way there. His expertise was North Africa, he knew everything about the machinations of Algerian Terrorists. He'd learned a lot about China recently, but he was no expert. He'd have to sound more authoritative than he felt, Rosy needed reassurance and they needed her.

"I've heard of them using six operatives to follow an American housewife, doing nothing more than a little shopping." He said. "So first thing is, don't panic."

"I have colleagues and this isn't the west." She replied. "They can't simply pack up and move to another town. Some of them have young children. Do I tell them not to panic?"

"We should go inside Rosy."

Crap ! No one seemed to have taught her even the basics. Rosy showed no sign of wanting to move and they might be under surveillance.

“Are you sensing anything ?” He asked the kids, who were still crammed inside the van.

There was the usual muttering between them, before Trudy shook her head at him.

“Nothing.” She said.

“That’s good news.” He told Rosy. “The authorities were probably just suspicious and decided to have you followed.”

“Until they discover their people are dead or confused !” She snapped at him. “And what is this with sensing people and stopping hearts ? George said you were political activists, sympathetic to our cause.”

“You’ve spoken directly with George Polandrous ? Recently ?” He asked.

“By email, I send a message to London most days, sometimes twice a day. I’m not stupid ! The emails look fairly innocuous and sent to his education subsidiary.”

He smiled at her, but really wanted to give her a hard slap. George was an amateur, but he’d been through enough to have more common sense. Innocuous emails, probably full of false names to indicate places and numbers to indicate dates and times. Simple personal codes that are incredibly hard to break, but look what they were, codes. No wonder they were having her followed.

“We really should get inside now.” He said.

“Fine ! Terry is looking forward to seeing you.”

Rosy Li wasn’t their fan anymore. He’d seen it before, local activists who think it’s all a game and get bent out of shape once reality bites them on the backside. She stomped away from them and round the side of the building. The kids took the opportunity to climb out of the van and stretch their legs.

“She’s considering turning us in.” Said Trudy.

“To save her family and colleagues.” Added Lisa.

Fuck ! The day just kept getting better.

“We can’t go back to the hotel.” He told them. “Did you leave anything there that you really need ?”

“Ruby told us to always assume the worst.” Said Roger. “We always pick up our passports and money as we leave hotel rooms.”

“Ruby said clothes can always be replaced.” Added Lisa.

“Ruby taught you well.” He said.

Three nodding heads in front of him. Of course he should have told them the same thing, but no one had foreseen events in Baishan getting so out of control. Trudy was actually hugging him.

“Don’t worry about us Serge.” She said. “We can cope with most things. Wearing grubby clothes for a day or so isn’t that serious.”

They followed Rosy, round the side of the building and through an open side door. They had to guess at the direction and ended up at a locked outside door. A quick backtrack and they entered a room with several people sat in armchairs. It looked like a teacher’s lounge area and sat talking to Rosy was Terry.

“Hi Serge, welcome to China.” Said Terry. “I hear we’ll be heading south tonight ?”

“As soon as you can be ready would be wise.” Said Serge.

“Sounds good to me. I’ve had enough inactivity to last a lifetime.”

Terry, the almost legendary survivor of the group that had gone into the Karakum desert with George. It took luck to survive an American missile strike and skill to survive an encounter with Max Krause and his hired thugs. Terry had spent days in Karakum, waiting for his wounds to heal. He knew Serge well and he understood that the kids weren’t completely human.

“Get your equipment.” Terry told his men. “You all know the plan.”

“By heart and backwards.” Someone muttered.

“Good, because I want you ready to leave in thirty minutes !”

Serge was watching Rosy as she began to walk away. Trudy pulled on his arm.

“Stop her, she’s going to call the police !” Shouted Trudy.

One of Terry’s men had her before she could run out of the room. Rosy Li was sat in an armchair and told not to move.

“Are you sure ?” Asked Terry. “We’ve been here for a while and she’s been really good to us.”

“She was going to betray us to save her family.” Said Trudy.

Serge smiled at Terry and he shrugged. They could both understand her motives.

“What do we do with you Rosy ?” Asked Terry. “My first reaction is to kill you and dump your body in the nearest woods.”

One of his men was stood behind Rosy, it only needed a word for him to snap her neck.

“There is another way.” Said Serge. “Trudy could..... Alter her memories, render her harmless.”

Trudy wasn’t looking happy about being volunteered for the job.

“I’m not the expert at that.” She said. “Ruby and Charlotte are the best.”

“But you can do it ?”

“Yes, but it will be a bit brutal. I might leave her looking lobotomised.”

“Don’t I get a say in this, your bastards ?!” Shouted Rosy.

“No, just be thankful we’re not killing you.” Said Serge. “Do it Trudy, the quicker the better.”

Lisa helped Trudy. At first they just seemed to talk to her, calming her down. Serge didn’t want to watch, he helped the others to collect weapons and equipment. Terry even knew where some spare clothing was kept for the students. It didn’t look as though the kids were going to travel in grubby clothing after all. By the time he was back in the teacher’s lounge, Rosy was smiling at him in a way that was quite disturbing.

“Crap !”

“I did tell you it would be brutal.” Said Trudy.

He knelt in front of Rosy and there was no recognition in her eyes. There was nothing there at all. No personality, no intellect, just a weird smile.

“Will she be like this forever ?”

“No.” Answered Lisa. “A few months and her memories will start to return.”

“Not of us though.” Added Trudy. “She’ll never remember us, or George.”

A lobotomy without a scar, it was scary. It was also a rough way to reward someone who’d looked after Terry and his men. Terry arrived with a bag of weapons and a backpack, which he handed to Serge.

“I found some clothing that should fit you.” Said Terry. “Crap ! You guys really did a number on Rosy.”

“Sorry.” Said Trudy. “I did my best in the time we had.”

“Better than killing her, I suppose.” Said Terry. “Come on, there’s a train due in twenty minutes.”

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The North Korean embassy in Ealing wasn’t the most impressive that Max had seen. A large fully detached house on an ordinary residential street. It wasn’t far from Acton Town tube station and within walking distance of the hotel where Sarah’s thirtieth birthday party had been held. There was a plaque above the door, but otherwise the building looked, ordinary. More like a church for one of the trendy happy-clappy religions than an embassy for the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.

Even George W Bush would have found it hard to find anything about the building to mark it as part of the Axis of Evil. Even the privet hedges along the front of the building were neatly trimmed.

“I’m more afraid of looking stupid than being shot at.” Said Sadie.

“Just get it up high on the tree and aiming at the front door.”

Max was sat at a bus stop, the narrow plastic seat doing dire things to his injured hip. He had a laptop computer open on his lap and looked like any other traveller, waiting for the bus to arrive. Sadie was doing what his leg stopped him from doing. She was going to put a small TV camera on a tree in a garden near the North Korean embassy. Ideally right opposite their front door, but a side view would do.

“They have to come there to get their equipment.” He’d told Sadie. “We just need to monitor who comes and goes.”

Actually fancy software monitored the camera and flagged up just the faces of people leaving the embassy. It was all legally purchased from a shop in Central London. Most people would have been shocked at the amount of high tech surveillance equipment, which could be simply be bought, over the counter. The camera had an extended life power pack and a solar panel, though he didn’t think that would get much work in Ealing. London, where the locals had a week of sunshine every summer and paid for it with a month of thunderstorm.

“Well done Sadie.”

He had an image on the screen, even at nine pm in the evening, the small camera was giving a nice sharp image. Any later and they’d have look suspicious, nine was just right. The camera tried for a public Wi-Fi link first and then went for an insecure domestic link. None of that mattered to Max, all he cared about was the picture on the screen. Now they could leave the software to do its magic. Sadie returned and sat next to him.

“Any problems ?” He asked.

“No, just one old guy walking a tiny dog. He didn’t even look at me.”

It made him happy to think of all the millions the west would be putting into expensive surveillance, when he’d probably get better results from a camera that had cost under a grand.

“We can’t start a shooting war with North Korea, Max.” Said Sadie.

He stood up and she fell into step beside him. Their hired car was a few streets away, just in case someone was monitoring number plates in the area near the embassy.

“If they send more of their thugs to London.” Said Max. “We will deal with them.”

She held onto his arm and stopped him walking.

“Max, listen to me. If you start disposing of North Korean agents, our own side will come after us.”

“I didn’t know we had a side.”

“You know what I mean ! It’s not the eighties any more Max, there are rules now.”

She was right and there were other methods. Simply disclosing the whereabouts of any North Korean agents to someone he knew in MI5, was likely to do the trick.

“Ok, we’ll work on getting them expelled.” He said. “But if that doesn’t work, we use other means.”

“That’s all I ask. Now you can buy me a decent meal.”

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