

Ruby 2

Chapter 7 – Happy Birthday

**“The special friends only room.” She said. “Are you people a gang of vampires or something ?”
“Something like that.” Answered Ruby.**

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Six fifty three her clock said, in the morning, an hour she'd only ever previously thought of as a myth. Times before eight were like Big Foot, or Big Brother contestants with a genuine personality. She thought they might exist, but never expected to see them. It was her 30th birthday and Sarah had woken early to get stressed about it. She sat on the edge of the bed and looked at the two or three hairs Robert had left on the pillow. She'd have to dump him !

“If only he didn't have that Robert Pattinson jawline.” She muttered.

No one else could see it, Trudy had told her she was being delusional. Robert had begun to talk about ditching his long term girlfriend and Sarah didn't want that to happen. Her relationships always lasted about three months, it was what she was used to. First month was red hot sex, like two racing Ferraris. Second month the moaning and recriminations would begin and she'd be wiping his pics off her phone by the end of month three. No one got hurt, or more accurately, rarely got hurt. It was how her life was, what she was used to. So, Edward Cullen lookalike or not, Robert was going to have to go. After the party of course, she wasn't going to her own 30th without a date. “Crap ! I never told Ruby about him.”

Ruby had found her Robert, when she'd badly needed an accountant. Robert had handled her financial affairs perfectly, but he'd come with a warning from Ruby.

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

Her relationships never ended well, even calling them relationships was probably over dignifying, what were really just flings. Now she had to let Robert go, but still keep him as her accounts guy. It was going to be tricky. Sarah was only wearing panties, as she stood up and looked at herself in the full length wardrobe mirror.

“Not bad for thirty.” She muttered. “Fuck ! My tits are starting to droop !”

She turned on the bedroom lights and realised it had been an illusion. The early morning sun, lighting up her room at an angle and creating worrying shadows. Her tits were fine and there was no hair trying to grow from her nipples, not yet.

“Thirty though. Shit, I don't want to be thirty !”

“Are you alright Sarah ?”

“Yeah, just having a fit of angst.”

Sophie calling, she was putting her up on a camp bed in the lounge. At one time it would have worried her to have a house full of guests. When she lived in her small social housing flat, she worried about being accused of running a bawdy house. Or even worse, being reported and having her housing benefit stopped. Her self-esteem was never that brilliant, but she looked at her naked reflection in the mirror and liked what she saw. Nothing sagged, looked overly wrinkled or past its best. Thirty though, it took some getting used to.

“The brain cells don't replace after you reach thirty.” Spider had told her.

She'd looked it up on the internet and he was right ! Seven thousand cells a day, or maybe that was a week ? Either way it was a bit scary. It was now all rapidly downhill until she started piddling in her knickers and smelling of lavender water.

"Fuck !"

"Do you need a hug ?" Asked Sophie.

"Later, after I've showered and dressed."

Sarah Simmons opened her curtains and tried to feel optimistic about life after thirty. Spider was dangerously close to forty, but he still seemed to cope with most things. Yes, she was going to dress and make everyone breakfast. She found her dressing gown and walked down the hall to the kitchen. Sophie, Trudy and Lisa had a bottle of champagne opened.

"Never too early for champagne." Said Lisa.

Serge muttered 'happy birthday,' from the lounge, but left them to it. Sarah hugged them all and then drank two glasses of champagne, very quickly. She was determined to have a great birthday.

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Max felt perpetually tired. All he'd done for two years was move around the prison Kallina had placed him in. The furthest he'd walked was about twenty feet from the area where he slept, to where she'd placed his chemical toilet. His muscles had lost their strength and he was completely out of shape. He'd read about astronauts coming back from the space station, unable to stand up and having to build up enough muscle to walk again. Bodies adjusted to the demands being put on them and he'd been a couch potato for just over two years.

"My own damn fault." He muttered. "I should have exercised."

He'd seen two holes in the ceiling, while he'd been shuffling along in the darkness. Just holes, high up in the roof of the caves. They lit up his world like searchlights and gave him the opportunity to check over his rations in a reasonable amount of light. He'd also been drinking the river water and keeping his bottled water for later. It tasted fine, but it was nice to see that it was clean and crystal clear. Of course, there might be a dead sheep lying in the water a few miles upstream, but it looked safe to drink.

Twenty paces and rest, he'd been keeping to the same routine for some time. Max ate little, hoping he'd need the rations to get him across the desert. He had to have a goal to keep himself going and he'd decided on a series of goals. Number one was getting out of the caves. His heart didn't seem to want to pump his blood fast enough, he was shattered after every twenty paces. More consequences of being idle for two years.

"Please don't let it be another crack in the rocks."

Light in front of him, but he'd already had two disappointments. Even at his snail's pace, he must have walked two or three miles, most of it fairly straight and descending slightly. There was another boulder in his path, easily climbed, but it felt like ascending Everest. He'd clambered over or round several other obstructions and each one had tested his tolerance to exercise. As he fell down the far side of the boulder, he saw an opening in the rocks. Wide enough to walk through, wide enough to drive a bus through ! It seemed to be dusk outside, but the light still hurt his eyes.

"Goal one done."

Goal two was finding a settlement or town in the desert to the north. South and southwest were out of the question, it was nothing but wars in those directions. East meant miles of blistering heat until he reached the ocean. So, it would be a slow trudge north. Not until he'd had a proper night's sleep though. Max sat in the cave entrance and couldn't see the setting sun. He could see its golden light

hitting the nearby hills though and the bushes not far away. Bushes meant water, it wasn't a completely dry desert.

"Slap up meal buddy." He muttered to himself.

It would only be tinned corned beef and tinned pineapple for dessert, but it was a banquet compared to what he'd been eating. In the morning he'd split his packs, making them into four bundles he could carry over his shoulders. That would be then though, for now he ate and looked forward to sleeping under the stars, rather than in total darkness.

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Ruby hadn't seen the Lemon Tree Hotel since it had been trimmed and decorated for Sarah's 30th birthday party. Party was too small a word for the mass meeting of the thirteen and their non-gifted friends. The muggles as Spider insisted on calling them and of course, himself. Mid-afternoon and Ruby had decided it was time to inspect the Lemon Tree and put her name on one of the hotel's better rooms. Would Serge be sharing her bed for the night? She still wasn't sure. Ruby banged her knuckles on the glass doors to get someone's attention.

"Come in." Said Spider. "We're ready, apart from the cake."

"I imagined it would be seedy." She said. "But it isn't.... actually it is, but nicely seedy."

Having a welcoming bar in the reception area had been a good idea, it gave the wallflowers somewhere to call their own. Not everyone would want to stay in the main function room all night.

"Mary even found us a band." Said Spider.

"Just a few friends," said Mary Dwyer, "but they're pretty good."

Mary, the wonderful Mary that Spider had told her about. Ruby didn't trust anything that was too convenient and Mary turning up and proving to be so useful, was far too convenient. Normally she wouldn't have dug into the mind of anyone's friend, but the safety of the thirteen was paramount. Kurt and Kallina had left her to look after them, she was very much in loco parentis.

"Mary, good to meet you at last." She said. "Spider has told me so much about you."

"Oh, that sounds ominous."

Ruby dug into Mary's mind, finding nothing she needed to worry about. There was a long history of a life you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy. Abuse, addiction, even a bungled suicide attempt. It was none of her business and she wasn't about to tell Spider about any of it. The only thing that mattered, was that Mary was no threat to the kids. She held Mary's arm and gave her one of her best smiles.

"Be my guide." She said. "Show me what you guys have done to the place."

"Charlotte and Eugenie have done the hard work." Said Mary. "Wait until you see the party room."

It was a large room that was probably used for post wedding meals and parties. There was room for twice the numbers who were likely to turn up for Sarah's birthday bash. They wouldn't rattle about in it though, the extra space would make it comfortable. Four long tables had been put in front of a small stage. The tables were ready, fully decorated, there were fresh flowers everywhere.

"Sarah will love this." Said Ruby.

Three young men were busy setting up a speaker system on the stage. They waved at Mary, before going back to running cables across the back of the stage.

"They've got a girl singer, quite good." Said Mary.

"What are they called?"

"Nicely Skanky. Yes I know, but their music is good."

Charlotte was putting the finishing touches to the centre table. There was just one large gap in the middle of the table.

“Who’s picking up the cake ?” Ruby asked.

“Serge.” Answered Eugenie.

“He took Sophie with him.” Added Charlotte.

It amused Ruby to think that Serge, the legendary agent of the French Security services, had been sent to pick up a birthday cake. She was carrying the cricket bag that he’d brought back from Budapest. Charlotte moved closer and grabbed her arm.

“You must see the other function room.” She said.

Mary was smiling, but Ruby could feel waves of frustration and annoyance.

“The special friends only room.” She said. “Are you people a gang of vampires or something ?”

“Something like that.” Answered Ruby.

The room was perfect, Charlotte had set it up like a war room. Enough seats for everyone, lots of white boards and the famous pine box full of Kurt’s papers was in the middle of the centre table. Ruby placed the cricket bag next to the box.

“I see you’ve even put a fridge in here.” Said Ruby.

She opened it, to find it full of wine bottles, beer and soft drinks.

“Already here. I think this must usually be some sort of staff rec room.”

Eugenie had come into the room and both she and Charlotte were watching her. Ruby liked the room, she liked the hotel and she was sure that Sarah was going to have a sensational party.

“Is Kurt coming ?” Asked Eugenie.

“I don’t think so, but Kallina will be here.”

Their faces, the look of disappointment. They’d grown up with Kurt, he was their father figure. Now Kurt was gone and they felt confused and a little betrayed. Everyone adored Spider, but in the way people love a slightly dodgy first cousin. As for Serge ? He was usually too much of a cold fish to gain their affection.

“Why doesn’t he visit us anymore ?” Asked Charlotte.

Kurt had left her with a lot of problems to sort out, some of them too private for her to share with anyone. There had been his crazy idea that they’d become a new version of Adam and Eve, populating the world with gifted super beings. It was a horrendous idea, that even he had realised was insane. They could never pair up like that, their progeny were likely to be monsters. In a way they were monsters already, but quiet and civilised monster, most of the time. Their children would be the real thing though and then the world really would be in trouble. That was private, that insanity would remain locked in her memory. They deserved to know the truth though.

“Sit down.” She said. “It’s something I should have told you two years ago.”

They would tell the others, it was a fairly painless way to inform all of the thirteen. But it wouldn’t be painless, she could already feel the tears beginning. Ruby dug a small packet of tissues out of her bag. Where to begin ?

“Kurt is very old, as is Kallina.” She began. “As you’re aware, Kallina has her own way of dealing with the problems of her immense age.”

They were giving each other knowing looks and smiling at her.

“Baba Yaga is crazy..... but a nice sort of crazy.” Said Eugenie.

They almost always called her Baba Yaga and always used the name with affection. She was their wild mother from ancient mythology. Kallina had allowed herself the luxury of mild insanity, whereas Kurt had paid the price for remaining sane.

“Kurt is even older than Baba Yaga.” Said Ruby. “He kept himself alert to protect you, suffering the effect of all those centuries on his mind.”

“On his soul.” Added Eugenie.

“Yes, you understand..... Good.”

“Can’t we do something to help him ?” Asked Charlotte.

They were all crying now, she shared her pack of tissues with them. Ruby was shaking her head.

“No, he’s simply lived for too long. He’d damaged beyond repair and knows it. I looked into his mind once, really looked.....”

Eugenie moved round the table and held her hand. Kallina had done some terrible things, so had she, but they had emotions about those events. Inside Kurt was just a burnt out hole, where empathy and regret should have been. She had to be honest, tell them the unadorned truth.

“Kurt has helped us as much as he can.” She said. “There is a danger that if he remains, he may become a danger to this world, even a danger to us.”

“No !” Shouted Charlotte.

“Kurt told me that one day I would go to Karakum and find no one there. They’ve all been stretched out over too many centuries. Most of the elders have gone and soon, quite soon I think. Kurt will allow his life to end.”

“We’ll be on our own.” Said Eugenie.

Ruby hugged her.

“No ! You will never be on your own.”

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Sophie sat in the passenger seat of the SUV and enjoyed looking down on most of the traffic. It was the closest most people got to driving a truck and it gave a real feeling of being in control. Serge had hired the vehicle at the airport.

“Just in case we need to ferry people about.”

Neither of them knew the cake shop, or the part of North London where it was. Serge had put the Stoke Newington post code into the satnav and it had brought them right across London.

“Not far now.” Said Serge. “Keep your eyes open.”

Postcodes were fine, they got you pretty close and then it was down to being alert and finding somewhere to park their vehicle.

“There.” Said Sophie, pointing. “Anabelle’s Sweet Retreat.”

There was even a gap right in front of the shop, even if it was on a yellow line. Serge needed to mount the kerb to get in the gap. As the engine died, Sophie climbed out of her side of the vehicle, having to jump down the last foot or so. Her eyes took in the window display and she was mesmerised.

“Serge ! Please tell me you have some British money ?”

“I have a credit card, just don’t buy everything.”

Serge asked about the birthday cake, while she filled several bags with cupcakes, flapjacks and various other slices of sweet delight. There were a lot of people coming to the party, nothing would be wasted. A woman came from the back of the shop, carrying a large box.

“I agreed the wording with Ruby Mason.” She said.

Serge was laughing, Sophie had to look at the cake in the box.

‘Happy 30th Sarah !’ In large yellow letters.

‘Another fucking year older !’ In slightly smaller red letters.

“Perfect.” Said Sophie. “Sarah will love it.”

The cake was quite heavy, so Serge needed to make two trips to carry it and her many purchases.

“A hundred and forty pounds Sophie ! Who spends a hundred and forty pounds on cupcakes ?!”

He was smiling though, as he put the boxes and bags in the rear of their SUV. As she waited, Sophie felt something, a presence, looking for them. Far out west, in the vicinity of the airport, a single man, one like them. She waited for Serge to get his seat belt on.

"There is one of them here." She said. "Looking for us. Probably the man they were expecting in Budapest."

"Is he alone?"

"There is only one like me, but he might have men with guns with him, as guards."

Serge looked serious and turned the engine off.

"Where is he?" He asked.

"Out by the airport at Heathrow. He's like us, but different, I can feel him. He's older, your age, he has our gifts."

"Can he feel you?"

"Yes, that's how Kurt found Ruby. He's on his own, so he's unlikely to make a move against us. He can find where we are though."

Serge used his phone to call Ruby. Then he asked her all the same questions again, so that he could repeat it all to Ruby. It was stressful and Sophie just wanted to be back with the others. She felt safe with the others.

"Can you describe him?"

"No Serge, Ruby knows how this works. I just feel a man in his fifties, like us but different."

More chatter with Ruby.

"How is he different?"

It was crazy, they needed to get to the Hotel in Ealing. Ruby would understand when they were face to face. Sophie smiled at Serge and put her hand on his arm. No use of her gifts, Serge was family.

"Drive to the hotel Serge. I need to talk to Ruby myself."

Serge told Ruby they'd be there in under an hour. He put the post code for the Lemon Tree Hotel into the satnav and pulled away from the kerb.

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They lived well compared to many. It was about seven pm and the thirteen were carrying out their mission like a well-oiled machine. Their current mission was to put pre-prepared food into the hotel's huge commercial oven. It had all been bought ready to cook, just put it in a hot oven for forty minutes. It was the expensive way to cater for a birthday party, but Ruby wasn't short of money. George was the key to her wealth, but he'd politely refused to attend the party.

"I'm getting too old, or too sensible to attend such things Ruby. I'll be your guy in London though, just let me know what you need me to do."

She watched as Charlotte pulled out a perfectly cooked tray of sausage rolls and replaced it with a large pepperoni pizza.

"That all smells wonderful." She said. "If Sarah's late, I just might start eating some of it."

"On her way." Replied Lisa. "Robert is driving her here."

Robert! Ruby blamed herself, she should have kept a closer eye on that one. Now he'd end up an emotional mess and Sarah would be left to look after her own accounts, again. She'd be shredding letters from the tax man and avoiding the doorbell within weeks. Ruby would help her to find someone else though, preferably female next time. Despite her threats, she owed Sarah a lot for her help in Eastern Europe and she would never simply abandon her.

"Here, you look like you need it."

Serge was handing her a chilled glass of white wine. Despite their age difference he was still the closest thing she'd had to a proper relationship in quite a few years. He didn't ask questions, which had always been the downfall of the previous men in her life.

"Thank you."

"I love the wording on the cake."

They both laughed and she found herself leaning in to him, wanting to feel his closeness. She was going to invite him to share her bed, it had been too long since she'd lost herself in the pleasures of a decent sex life.

"That must be the birthday girl." Said Serge.

A lot of cheering in the distance and party poppers going off. Ruby puts her arm through his and lets him lead her out to the front of the hotel. Sarah was there, being fussed over by the thirteen and given a large glass of champagne. Sarah's dress is short and fairly diaphanous, hiding less of her than a decent bathing suit would hide. Still, she had the body to get away with.

"Happy birthday !" Ruby called.

Everyone joined in, as Charlotte appeared with plates full of nibbles. The party seemed to have been moved to the reception bar area for now, but that didn't matter. There was enough champagne for everyone to have sufficient to wake up with a headache. Ruby hugged Sarah, while trying not to spill her wine.

"So, Robert huh ?" She whispered.

"You know me."

Yes she did and she wouldn't have Sarah any other way. Maybe a bit less neurotic, but even that had its own charm, sometimes. Just as everyone was beginning to sit down and eat pizza slices, Kallina arrived.

"Wow !" Exclaimed Serge.

True, anyone appearing out of thin air tends to get attention. She'd also been to Baku and picked up Jalil, dragging him through the ether with her. It was the way she looked though, that had caused Serge's reaction.

"Kallina, you look.....stunning." Said Ruby.

"And on time for once." Added Spider.

Baba Yaga had scrubbed up very well. Kallina looked like a blonde Russian Glamour model, on her way to a nightclub. She looked much the same as she'd looked the night that she and Kurt had found Ruby in London. For once Olga, their blonde Valkyrie, was being upstaged. There was a certain amount of surprise from the new friends, the ones who weren't used to people arriving out of nowhere. Mary had gone quite pale and was pulling at Spider's arm. Even Jalil looked to be in shock, still dressed in a business suit, as though she'd plucked him out of his office. Kallina had forgotten who knew what, it had to happen one day. Her face was a picture of confusion, so Ruby hugged her, it seemed appropriate.

"I've done something awful, haven't I Ruby ?"

"No Kallina, you haven't. To hell with it, who would believe them anyway ? Get a glass of champagne and enjoy yourself."

Jalil looked happy to be among so many friendly face and Mary Dwyer was busy kissing Spider. The band were there somewhere and two American Football strippergrams were due in an hour. It might be nice if no one did anything else that broke the laws of physics, but it wasn't a total catastrophe if they did. YouTube was full of levitating Asian girls and no one believed their own eyes anymore.

They certainly wouldn't believe the ramblings of a pop group called Nicely Skanky. Kallina was pulling her towards the back of the room.

"He's escaped Ruby. Jumped down the old toilet."

Ruby prided herself on talking fluent Baba Yaga and understood what had happened.

"Max is dangerous Kallina. You need to find him !"

"I know where he is. He's walking across the desert, heading north."

There was a marker of a kind in Kallina's bright blue eyes, something that told Ruby how crazy Kallina was at any one time. She was there, fully alert and not talking nonsense.

"Can't you put him back where you had him ?"

"He can't get far, the nearest settlement is a two or three week walk away. I'll watch him and rescue him when his food runs out."

Rescue ! Ruby knew Kallina's moods and understood what was going on. She was allowing Max to have a walking holiday for a while, a vacation.

"Be careful." Said Ruby. "If he gets back to civilisation he'll try to kill the children again."

"It'll be fine. If I forget about him, he'll die in the desert."

Ruby didn't share her confidence; Max did seem to have a real knack for surviving just about anything. Any further discussion was stopped by the early arrival of two guys in American Football uniforms. Spider had done well, they were actually young and reasonably attractive.

"Sarah !" Yelled Spider. "You've a present that needs unwrapping."

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The party had been a huge success and no one had gone home, apart from Mary. It appeared her late pass from her husband ran out at about two am, so she'd booked a taxi home. Spider seemed happy enough and resigned to suffering the pitfalls of dating a married woman.

"So, who goes to Korea with you ?" Asked Charlotte.

"I've had too much to drink." Said Ruby. "We'll discuss that tomorrow."

"It is tomorrow." Muttered Serge.

They'd gone to the second function room to get away from their other guests. The band had decided to sleep there, as the rooms were far nicer than sleeping in the back of their van. The two strippergram guys had turned out to be gay and had claimed one of the better rooms for the night.

"I knew they were too well groomed to be straight." Sarah had commented.

Jalil and his son had been shown to their rooms, which just left Robert ! Ideally Ruby would have sent him home, or sent him to bed for the night. Prising him off Sarah was a problem though, they seemed joined at the hip.

"Talk to anyone about what you hear and Kallina will kill you." Sarah had told him.

He seemed convinced and nervously watched every move Kallina made. It had been a joke of course, maybe. A few drinks and Ruby's tolerance of threats to the kids, reduced considerably.

"Lau has to go." Said Charlotte. "He's the only one of us who even looks Korean."

"I have a few ideas to make you all look Korean." Added Kallina.

Of course they weren't going to let the subject go. They were all going to worry it, the way a cat worries a half dead bird. Most people were still drinking and munching at cold pizza. Why is cold pizza so great when you're drunk and so awful when you're sober ?

"What did you think of the cake ?" Ruby asked Sarah.

"Great, I took a few pics and put them on Instagram."

Sarah went back to snogging Robert.

"You'll need me with you though." Said Spider.

“Me too Ruby.” Said Olga. “I know people there who will help us.”

Why fight it, they seemed determine to not let the subject die. She was about to break Spider’s heart, but there was no way to avoid it.

“I’ve said it before.” She said. “We’re not a democracy. You can refuse to do as I ask, but I hope none of you will. I’ve decided on my list and Olga will be going with me.”

A happy Olga, being patted on the back by everyone within reach. Most of them were too drunk or tired to do anything that required them to walk across the room.

“Spider will be staying in London.” She continued. “To finish the investigation into the death of Natalie Fernandez.”

He looked upset, but he was nodding at her. He knew that world, he understood how the escort trade operated. He was even dating a girl who’d once been in the sex trade.

“I will miss you.” She added.

“I understand Ruby. I’m the only one here who knows the right contacts.”

“Who else goes ?” Asked Imran.

He’d been quiet all night, helping in the kitchen and then listening to the band. It was as though he’d popped out the cork of a champagne bottle. Everyone was asking if they were staying or going.

Monique was asking if she’d be on Spider’s team in London.

“Quiet ! Please.” Yelled Ruby. “There will be three teams. I’ll take one group into North Korea. Spider will need support for his investigation and Serge will be leading a third team.”

“Where to ?” Asked Serge.

More talking over each other, more yelling at each other. Ruby just wanted it all to stop, as Sophie began to pull at her arm.

“Stop it Sophie. I’ll give out the team names in the morning, when we’re all sober.”

“No Ruby ! He’s here, very close now.”

They could do it when they had to, behave like a well organised team. The one like them, but different was near Southfields Station. Ruby left with Sophie, while Kallina went hunting on her own. Charlotte took Eugenie with her, together they were just about unstoppable.

“We need him alive.” Ruby had told them.

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Running through the streets brought back memories of racing through the streets of Budapest, to save Sarah from a gang of thugs. It was different now though, they were London streets that Ruby was running along, quiet and slightly boring Ealing streets.

“How many like us ?” She asked.

“Just him.” Replied Sophie. “He’s talking to others though, I feel his thoughts. Not others like us, he has about six armed men with him.”

The early hours of the morning and there were still quite a few people near Southfields Tube Station. A couple kissing in the doorway of a closed shop, a man taking his dog for a walk. There was a group of people laughing near the locked station entrance. It all mattered, people knew Ruby and her people in Ealing. The owners of the Lemon Tree Hotel had her correct name and address and Spider’s. If anything went wrong, they really were crapping on their own doorstep.

“There.” Said Sophie. “Baba Yaga has seen them.”

Two men in expensive suits who fit into the scene remarkably well. No one will have given their Korean features a second look. If only it was going to be that easy for Ruby and her people to blend into the Korean population. One of them lifts his hand and fires at a target Ruby can’t see. A silencer again, all she can see is a series of muzzle flashes. He must have hit a parked car, the bullets striking

the steel bodywork make a hammering sound. The girl kissing in the shop doorway looks towards the man with the gun and begins to scream. Crap ! It was all going tits up ! Ruby concentrates her mind and broadcasts her thoughts to the others. It'll light her up like a beacon to the one like them, but it has to be done.

"Take them all out now." She said. "Quickly ! We can't risk a confrontation with the authorities." Cops were everywhere these days, armed cops. There seemed to be a lone nutter or a terror group in the media every day, causing mayhem in quiet places like Ealing. They might only have ten or fifteen minutes until a van full of armed police turned up. Ruby used her right index finger to point her gift at the man with the gun. He melted without saying a word. The only sound was a slight gasp from Sophie. Like a Styrofoam cup placed on a hotplate, he collapsed into a heap that no longer looked even slightly human. There was the sound of an explosion from a nearby street and now several people were screaming.

"Baba Yaga." Said Sophie.

It might have been a mistake to tell her to act quickly, Kallina didn't do subtle or discreet at the best of times. The men obviously worked in pairs, the second gunman walked out from the shadow of a tree and raised his gun. Ruby twitched her finger in his direction, but missed him and turned the tree into a huge column of flame. Perfect ! Fucking perfect !

"Ruby !" Shouted Sophie.

Their training was good, having a tree burst into flames hadn't slowed him down at all. Ruby leapt to her left, ripping her expensive party dress as she hit the asphalt. Two bullets came close, one hitting the car right behind her. Sophie could be mean though and the gunman's head exploded into a cloud of orange and red. Ruby scrambled to her feet, noticing that her leg had been cut during the fall. Oh great, another scar to join the others. At this rate her skin would look like a spider's web by the time she reached forty. Another explosion, so large that leaves began to drop from the trees that lined the street.

"Are you alright ?" Asked Sophie.

"Yes, thank you. We need to find the others."

The man walking his dog is now hiding behind a car and hugging a bundle of red fur. His dog had been hit by a stray bullet and looks to be dead. He looks up at her;

"Why did they shoot Hugo ?"

"Sorry." She replied.

People now, running away from the direction of the explosions, some wearing just their bed time attire. It's difficult to go against the flow of the crowd and Ruby looks at her watch. Five minutes since they'd first arrived at Southfields, just five minutes ! All that destruction and the death of poor Hugo, crammed into such a short space of time.

"He won't get up." Said Charlotte.

It was him, the one like them. No fancy suit, just a middle aged Korean guy in GAP clothing, who looked terrified. All his thoughts are there for her to see, like a tape playing in his head.

"Did he have guards ?" Asked Ruby.

"Just the one." Answered Eugenie. "I think the rest are fighting Kallina."

"We got two." Added Sophie.

Eugenie is pointing up, towards another man in an expensive suit. He's jammed into a tree, his arms and legs going off at impossible angles. The media were going to love it !

"He's not like us at all really." Said Charlotte. "Like a radio that can't turn itself off."

It was true, he was broadcasting his every thought, just a pity it was all in Korean. Charlotte could speak his language though.

"He's terrified." She said. "Of us !"

"Get him to the hotel." Said Ruby. "Knock him out and carry him if you have to. I'm going to help Kallina."

"Careful, they have a grenade launcher." Said Charlotte.

A grenade launcher, in Ealing !? Where the hell had they managed to get their hands on one of those ? Their embassy, of course, you could bring a container full of weapons into the country and call it a diplomatic bag.

"Just get him back to The Lemon Tree and stay there." She said. "The police will probably begin house to house enquiries, so be prepared for that."

Sirens now and more scared people, one girl just wearing a night dress. Ruby turns into the street where the explosions had occurred and sees at least four burning cars and a large tree, going up like a roman candle. Crap ! Baba Yaga comes to town.

"There Ruby, in the doorway." Yelled Sophie.

Another fit man in a suit, this one carrying an assault rifle. What the hell, she could hardly make matters any worse. Ruby pointed at him and brought the fires of hell down on the North Korean agent.

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