

Ruby 2

Chapter 16 – Nearly There

“Thank you Jurgis.” She muttered. “You were a bastard, but I owe you a hell of a lot.”

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Sir Edwin Fox, known as Foxy to friends and foes, had parted the blinds on one of his windows to look outside. The piles of cars looked the same as they had two weeks before, when he'd last looked. He knew the car breakers and scrap yard was designed to be just a cover, but it needed to give the appearance of being genuine.

“Do the piles of cars ever change Lily?” He asked.

He was driven to work and rarely saw much of what went on in the outside world. His PA on the other hand, drove a small Mazda and was always moaning about the muddy car park.

“Yes sir. They get crushed and trucks arrive to take the metal away.” She replied.

“Good, good.”

It was all a distraction of course, something to give him time to think. Lily might be only twenty or so, but she'd become his sounding board. Not surprising really, considering the secret nature of his department. So few people to discuss things with, it was almost inevitable that people in his position, tended to bounce things off their PA.

“I've lost my way on that memo.” He said. “New page and start again.”

Still a pad and pencil, still written in shorthand. He liked that, so much more interactive than a damn Dictaphone. As Lily turned over a page, he noticed she had a new tattoo. A wing of some kind, just visible near her collar bone. It was permissible, as long as it wasn't clearly visible. She saw him looking and blushed, pulling her blouse over the offending wing. Foxy sat back in his chair and smiled at her.

“I don't care, but personnel can make a fuss.” He said. “Angel or dragon?”

“Dragon.”

No showing him of course and he'd never ask to see it. Foxy had worked to his own rules about what was and wasn't appropriate, long before it became mainstream.

“You have the recipient information.” He said. “Prime Minister, eyes only etc.”

She was nodding at him and transferring notes from his previous attempt.

“We need to lie to the Prime Minister Lily. Not a huge lie, but just a little, for the good of the nation and all that.”

“A normal day then sir.”

His PA probably knew far more about what was really happening in the intelligence community than most government ministers. She certainly knew ten times more than most MPs. Her vetting always came back with a glowing report, but what did she tell her parents? How did she explain the all night shifts when a flap was on? It was a difficult life for those with a family and he was thankful for being a rather reclusive old man.

“Copy the data received from the Americans.” He said. “Satellite images, a few tourists picture, everything including the kitchen sink.”

Foxy leant back in his chair and looked at a cobweb in a corner of the ceiling. That cobweb had been there a long time, it had seen a lot of flaps and several minor panics.

“Prime Minister.” He began. “Regarding the alleged chemical fire in Southern China.....”

He dictated a minor lie about giving instructions for a group of local subversives to examine the rail yard and report back on what they discovered. The major omission was that he'd asked Ruby to destroy everything in a major blast.

"Something impressive Ruby, something they can't ignore."

He could see the satellite pictures in his memory, the heat and electrical storms that had risen high into the atmosphere, almost touching the edges of space. Beyond impressive, the massive blast had been filmed by two cameras on the international space station. Tourists had filmed the column of fire, from as far away as Dandong. Film clips were everywhere, some of the most viral YouTube had ever known.

"Massive explosion in Southern China." Screamed the media. "Blast the equivalent of ten Hiroshimas, felt as far away as Beijing."

He'd asked for impressive and Ruby's strange gifted kids had obliged. It seemed almost churlish to say that it was too damned impressive. One thing to cause a blast that couldn't be ignored, to leaving a hundred square miles reduced to scorched earth and rubble. The Prime Minister knew of course, just not officially and that was a huge difference.

"Stop the whispering Foxy ! I need an official memo that the security services had nothing to do with this. Can't have our people causing that kind of destruction in a country we aren't even at war with. For Christ's sake Foxy, they're building our new generation of nuclear power plants."

A memo was asked for and a memo he'd write. Her Majesty's security services had not directly caused any destruction in China. Perish the thought.

"As for the Chinese....."

"Sorry is that part of the memo ?"

"No, sorry Lily. Just pondering and thinking."

As for the Chinese ? They had ignored all the media clamouring for more information. When that just stirred up more conjecture, they'd invented a story about an old weapons dump exploding. Something left over from the Korean War in the fifties. Eventually the Chinese government had come up with a chemical fire, at an army base in the mountains. Hints of top secret weapons and a dreadful accident. His contact at MI6 had been quite impressed.

"Gives the media something to spin and cautions the west about underestimating their high tech weapons ability."

Several neighbouring nations were complaining to China about radiation spilling over their borders. Nothing too bad, not so far at least. It was a story that wasn't going to go away anytime soon. The cover story also gave the Chinese a reason to move fifty thousand troops into the region. Officially they were there to help tidy up. Unofficially it was a manhunt for Ruby's people.

"No good I can't concentrate. Can I see the dragon tattoo ?"

"It's only small. All that talk about Hả Long Bay gave me the idea."

Of course, Hả Long Bay meant descending dragon bay. There it was, just below her collar bone and easy to see, without her having to show too much bare skin. A Chinese style dragon in full colour. Normally he didn't like tattoos, but her small dragon was exquisite.

"Gorgeous Lily. Now where was I ?"

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The boat had been left moored at the jetty. There was no sign of whoever it belonged to; probably they'd fled into the surrounding countryside. A fishing boat covered in dust, but at least the radiation level was only slightly above the normal background count. Terry had managed to start the engine and they'd all just about fitted into the single cabin.

"We're not going anywhere quickly," said Serge, "but at least we're moving."

"The engine looked quite elderly," said Terry, "best if we didn't push it too hard."

Serge wanted to be away from the area quickly, not sauntering downriver at a snail's pace. He could hear the engine below their feet, spluttering and coughing as though it might stop at any moment. Trudy was their eyes, watching from the front of the cabin. Not just her eyes of course, she looked for any mind showing an undue interest in their dusty old fishing boat.

"Luckily," she said, "there are few other vessels moving on this part of the river."

"Poor buggers !" Muttered Matt. "They probably think it's World War Three."

"Or the spirits of the ancient tomb." Added Roger. "People tend to put sudden disasters down to old superstitions."

"Whatever," said Serge, "we need to decide where to leave the river and head north. The area around Dandong is too busy. Ideally we could do with finding a train again."

There was a small table, still covered in the remains of an abandoned meal. Serge pushed it all to one side and spread out his map. There were notes on it, scribbled by Ruby and himself. There were no hints of what to look for in the direction they were heading.

"Nothing, no train lines for over a hundred miles." Said Terry.

"I'm not walking home !" One of Terry's men yelled.

"This boat isn't going to get us far." Said Lisa.

She'd been fairly quiet on the walk to the river, looking to be lost in her own thoughts. Serge felt guilty about the destruction all round them and he hadn't directly caused it. He studied the map, looking at all the villages and roads for the next fifty miles.

"We need to get a bit of distance between us and the inevitable military search party." He said.

"But before the engine dies on us." Said Terry.

Roger hadn't said anything, he just pointed at a spot on the map, where a road ran beside the river. Serge couldn't even pronounce the name of the place.

"Roger is right." Said Lisa. "Light industry, there will be trucks we can steal, or a driver we can persuade to take us north."

It looked a sensible distance to reach in their very slow boat and at least it was a plan, something to feel positive about. Serge pressed his forefinger against the Chinese writing on the map.

"Here, we'll go to where Roger suggested and head north by road."

"How far are we going ?" Asked Matt.

"You'll know when we get there !" Snapped Terry.

"Fine, but someone owes us a lot of overtime."

There was a lot of muttering in agreement. The original plan had been to use their own passports and genuine visas to leave via a major airport. That part of the plan had died when they'd been forced to leave their hotel, just ahead of being arrested. As for Terry and his team ? It had been assumed they'd make their own way home. Serge wondered if anyone had ever let them in on that part of the plan.

"Get some rest." Said Terry. "It'll be nightfall by the time we leave the boat."

"Oh, for my own bed again." Someone muttered.

Trudy was looking at him and nodding towards the cabin door. He followed her, though there wasn't that far to go on a small fishing boat. They stood together on the prow, watching the sluggish waters of the Yalu River go by.

"I feel it in their minds." Said Trudy. "Terry's people don't share our cause, they just fight for whoever pays them."

"I know, but they've done well and we'd never have got this far without them."

Trudy was looking uncomfortable. He didn't need super power to know something was troubling her.

"If they begin to refuse to accept orders." She said. "We might have to use our gifts on them. Nothing too extreme, just a gentle prod in the right direction."

"I can see that might need to happen, but only as a last resort." He said.

"There's Terry. Do we use our influence on him too?"

He sighed and watched the tiny bow wave, as their boat headed down river.

"At one time I'd have said no." He replied. "But Terry is different now, to the man I met in the deserts to the east of the Caspian Sea. I think he's realised that there was no backup plan to extract his team from China."

"Or for us!" She said.

"True, but we never came here seeking fame and glory. Yes, if it comes to it, you'll need to use your gifts on Terry."

Lisa had walked up to them without interrupting them. She'd just listened and nodded at him.

"Money will work." She said. "Offer them a bonus of some kind. Ruby has money and George will honour any promise we have to make."

"That is certainly worth a try." He replied.

There was an explosion to the north, only a mile or so from the river. Shortly after, the sound of a heavy machine gun could clearly be heard.

"The Chinese army have arrived." Said Trudy. "Probably firing at a harmless hunting party."

"Or a brown bear who showed up on their detectors." Added Lisa.

As they watched, a large double rotor attack helicopter, turned in a circle quite near to the river and headed north. Terry had come out of the cabin to watch it, accompanied by a few of his team.

"Someone is receiving the punishment meant for us." He said.

There were more explosions and the sound of more heavy weapons.

"They're jumpy," said Lisa, "I can feel it. They're shooting at anything that moves."

"Just so long as it isn't us." Said Terry. "Care you let me in on what you decided?"

"Decided?" Asked Serge.

"Your meeting out of earshot. We are all in the same boat Serge, literally."

It gave Serge the perfect opportunity to tell them about an extra bonus. There was the sound of another approaching helicopter though, the heavy thump of another double rotor gunship.

"Money Terry, we were deciding on a bonus. We should go back inside though, get well away from anyone looking from above."

He had everyone's attention, as they crowded into the cabin. It was really just an oversized wheelhouse and a few had to crush into the corners. The trick was to deliver the news he'd just made up on the fly, as though it had been carefully thought out.

"None of you expected to be in China this long." He began. "I give you my word that everyone here, will receive an extra two thousand a week bonus. It will be back dated to the day you arrived in China and will continue until you're safely back home."

"Pounds or dollars?" Someone asked.

"Pounds and in cash." Answered Serge.

"Everyone here?" Asked Roger.

Of course they had to be included, he kicked himself for not thinking of it himself. All kids liked expensive stuff; it was part of being a kid. Serge looked directly at Terry, who was probably wondering if he was included in the bonus deal.

"Everyone." Said Serge. "Everyone here, no exceptions."

Lots of smiling faces. It wasn't a sum to change anyone's life, it hadn't been intended to do that. It was a nice nest egg though and an encouragement to obey future orders.

"Great !" Said Matt. "You can keep us in China until Christmas if you like."

They all laughed and with that laughter, they became a team again.

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Max didn't like calling George Polandrous. Then again, he'd never liked reporting to any of his various handlers over the years.

'A significant problem with authority figures and criticism.'

It had said on his final assessment for the CIA and just about every other organisation he'd worked for. It was probably why he'd set up his own security business, to get away from having a boss. Then he'd needed money to expand and that had meant a full board and shareholders. They'd been worse than any boss he'd ever had.

"George, I have a problem."

"I'm here to help Max. What do you need ?"

Max looked at the bruised and bloodied man from North Korea and knew exactly what he needed. Would George give him access to them though ? The skinny guy was talking, they hadn't managed to shut him up since about three am. Torrents of what might well be priceless intelligence, all in a mishmash of at least half a dozen languages.

"Some doesn't even sound human." Sadie had said.

It was all being recorded and could be passed on to the thirteen, but ideally there had to be some feedback on it. A question and answer exercise between their prisoner and someone who knew the languages they used.

"I have a friend from Korea and he's talking George, talking a lot. I need someone who can understand him. I need one of the kids."

A moments silence as George digested the information. It was all outside of his instructions of course, catching one of them and leaving dead bodies in a quiet house in Cricklewood.

"Are we talking about one of their cousins from Korea ?" Asked George.

"Yes, a very talkative cousin."

"I can see how that would be immensely useful. Is their cousin fit enough to travel ?"

He'd already had that conversation with Sadie. There were no potentially fatal wounds, but their prisoner had remained silent for several hours. Max had encouraged him to talk, in the way he was best at. Only superficial damage, but it looked bad and they might have to help him to walk. Sadie had summed it up perfectly.

"Drag a beaten up guy along a London street and someone will call the cops, especially one who's shouting out in half a dozen weird languages."

He was still talking loudly, though he gave the impression of finally running out of steam.

"No George. They will have to come here to see their long lost cousin."

"Ahhhh, I see. Their mother has told all three of them to stay together at all times. As you know, she can be very protective. Can you arrange for someone to pick them all up from their Aunt Sarah's apartment ?"

"Yes, their Aunt Sadie can drive over to pick them up."

“Good, I’ll call them and tell them she’s on her way.”

The call ended and Max felt excited about finally meeting three of the kids. He’d never met them when chasing Ruby across most of Eastern Europe, but he had been trying to kill them all. It would be nice to actually talk to them, face to face.

“You’ll need to use the dead guy’s car.” He told Sadie. “Three of them to pick up from Sarah’s place.”

“On my way. Do you know where he kept his car keys.”

“Fruit bowl in the kitchen.”

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Kwan felt Ruby getting closer by the hour. Most of his people felt her approaching and they were relying on him to handle the situation. It would have been easy to throw up a mental barrier of some kind, screen them from her probing. Useless in the long term of course and then there was the question of Baba Yaga.

“You could tell the military about her.” Said Nari.

“That would just mean a lot of dead soldiers.” He replied. “Probably our deaths too. You just don’t understand the ferocity she is capable of, how her skills have developed over several centuries.”

He was ranting at her and there was a spot of moisture in her left eye. Making his wife cry wasn’t going to help anyone. He hugged her, letting her sob against his shoulder.

“I am sorry Nari, truly sorry. We have no real defence against this Baba Yaga and provoking her is likely to be more dangerous than simply ignoring her.”

She’d been seen several times now, lurking just at the edge of the tree line, a look of hatred on her face. Waiting of course, waiting for the others to arrive, waiting for her revenge.

“Why does she hate us so much ?” Asked Nari.

“She has reason enough, we killed someone she thought of as her child. Not directly and not by any order of mine, but she still has reason enough to hate us.”

“But they killed Jae ! Haven’t we a right to hate her ?”

“Yes we have and we can all go on hating and killing until few of us are left. The people in Pyongyang will still have their missiles and we’ll be too few in number to stop them being used. Is that the future you wish for our child ?”

“No my husband, it isn’t. What should we do ?”

In truth, he had no firm idea, other than waiting for Ruby to arrive and trying to talk her out of killing them all. Even if they joined forces, a lot of his people were going to die, perhaps some of Ruby’s group too. Ruby had been right, taking her naïve kids out into the world though. At first he’d thought her insane, but those who survived would be ten times stronger than if she’d kept them cosseted away in some secret village. That was effectively what he had done with his gifted people.

“We wait Nari.” He said. “For Ruby to arrive and join forces with us.”

“You really think she will ?”

“Oh yes, I’m certain of it.”

He wasn’t of course, but his wife wasn’t equipped to hear the truth, few of his people were.

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It was one of those dreams that can seem more vivid than real life. The colours looked just a bit too bright, the sounds a bit too sharp. Ruby was having a moment with Jurgis, even though he’d been dead for nearly five years. She could still feel the hard wall of the freight car digging into her back, knew she was dreaming. He was there, sat in front of her and offering her a bottle of Rakia.

“Come on.” He said. “No putting on any airs and graces with me. Drink it straight from the bottle. I remember when we lived on this stuff.”

He was right, she'd once loved the Bulgarian liquor, often drinking far too much of it. She took the bottle from him and drank a mouthful, feeling the alcohol sting her throat, making her cough.

"You're getting soft Ruby Mason." He said.

She drank more of the Rakia, feeling the effects of the high alcohol content. Could you become intoxicated in a dream? She certainly felt slightly light headed. She handed the bottle back to him.

"We haven't done badly." She said. "To get this far."

"You lost Patrick and Charlotte died, but came back again. Neat trick that, but I wouldn't rely on it to work every time."

For just a second she hated him. He had that East European thing about coming straight out with the unpalatable truth. No flowering anything up, no softening the inferred judgement in his statement.

Olga was often the same, wounding without intending to. What really hurt was the realisation that Jurgis was long dead and it was her own unconscious mind doing the damage. Of course she blamed herself for Patrick's death. Jurgis was actually leaning forward to touch her hand.

"No! Don't touch me." She snapped.

"Poor Ruby, the truth always did cut you like a knife. Poor soft western baby."

"Bastard! Tobor was right about you. Rotten, right down to your fucking core."

He was smiling at her and handing back the Rakia. She took a good swig and smiled back at him. Like old times again, their mixture of mutual hatred and animal passion.

"You've done well Ruby. I'm proud of you." He said.

"I couldn't have done it without having so much of you stuck in my head."

"True, very true."

She was grinning at him, as she took a sip from the bottle and passed it back.

"Modesty never was your strong point."

"You need to be tougher with them Ruby, you know that. Your little group of western babies needs to hate you a little, feel some genuine anger. Even Olga has known the soft life for too long."

"I know, but it's hard."

"Don't use stupid excuses Ruby, you're better than that."

He leant towards her and for a moment, she felt his lips touch hers. A vivid dream became a grey reality, as she woke up. Only just after dawn, the light showed her a group of sleeping people. Olga was awake of course, her eye glued to a gap in the wall. Murad too, turning towards her and smiling.

"Just fields out there, miles and miles of fields." He said.

Ruby knew what she had to do. She banged the flat of her hand on the wooden wall of the carriage and began to shout.

"Wake up! Wake up! Find your weapons and ammunition. Get ready to fight!"

Lots of eyes opening and people scrambling about, trying to open canvas bags that hadn't been opened in days. Some scared eyes, looking around nervously.

"Are we under attack?"

Ruby ignored the questions and just banged the wall again and again.

"Weapons ready! Come on you soft babies, get ready to fight."

They quickly realised it was just a drill. Murad helped Sophie to remove her enormous Russian Bazooka from its bag. They all helped each other, which was encouraging.

"Ten minutes and still not ready! You'd all be dead by now."

Olga was ready of course, had been two seconds after Ruby had first shouted for them all to wake up. Olga slept with her hand on a much loved AK47, the spare ammunition in a cloth bag by her right hand. Ruby wanted to use Olga as a good example, but knew her Valkyrie wouldn't appreciate that.

No one wants to be seen as teachers pet. Eventually everyone had their weapon ready to use, spare ammunition at hand. Most of them were glaring at her, which secretly pleased her. There was a small maternal voice somewhere in her mind, cringing at what she'd just done. She suppressed it and looked scornfully round the carriage.

"Fifteen minutes ! Fifteen minutes !" She yelled.

Not all the faces looked tired or unhappy. Sophie had her hands on the right places to fire the weapon, which was almost bigger than she was. Her face was alert, almost hoping it wasn't just a drill. Ruby had to grin at her.

"Sophie, I feel really sorry for whoever you get to fire that thing at."

It broke the atmosphere as everyone laughed. Jurgis would never have joked about such a thing, but she was beginning to realise she wasn't Jurgis. They needed toughening, maybe they needed a bit of anger to get them motivated. She was going to do it in her own way though.

"I know that drill was unfair." She said. "But the enemy won't be giving you a warning or wait for you to find your weapon. You rely on me to use my skills, or maybe Charlotte will get you out of a jam."

"Put the whammy on them." Said Sarah.

They all laughed at the expression Spider regular used, as a catch all for their various gifts.

"Yes the famous whammy." Said Ruby. "But you might be on your own in North Korea, or Charlotte might not be the one to see the enemy approach. You all need to be ready to fight. The drills will carry on until I'm happy you can all be ready in a few seconds."

"A few seconds ?" Muttered Sophie.

"You need to sleep next to your bazooka." Someone joked.

"You need to be ready." Said Ruby. "We'll soon be at Rakwon and you can guarantee they'll be prepared."

The train began to slow down, probably for another crew change over. They seemed to come about an hour after dawn, the arrival of a fresh engineer and driver. Ruby realised her own Glock pistol was in her right hand, spare ammunition by her side. It hadn't registered in her consciousness, finding her own weapon while the others found theirs. It was training, the instincts and reflexes drummed into her by months living with gun runners and bandits at an age when most girls were only worried about boys and frizzy hair.

"Thank you Jurgis." She muttered. "You were a bastard, but I owe you a hell of a lot."

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Delmar was happy to be out of Sarah's North London flat for a while. Sharing a home with two teenagers involved in an active sex life was becoming annoying. They were obviously used to doing what they wanted, when they wanted to do it. Isobel in particular, didn't even try to hide her annoyance at his arrival in their love nest.

"So you work for George ?" He asked Sadie. "I don't remember seeing you before."

"Freelancer really." She answered. "Max and I go way back and he needed someone to watch his back."

"A sort of Robin to his Batman." Said Isobel.

Sadie laughed, she had a pleasant laugh. Not the sort of person he'd expected to pick them up. George had told them a few details and that a friend of Max would be arriving to drive them to Essex. Sadie definitely wasn't what he'd expected. He could have pulled a lot of information straight out of her head, but George had sent her. She was honorary family, even if only on a freelance basis.

"Where exactly are we going in Essex ?" He asked.

"Chingford. The arse end of nowhere, but the house was available."

Probably the car too, it had a certain smell, a cross between stale takeaway chicken and unwashed armpits. Imran had been wrinkling his nose for the entire journey. Still, it was nice to be on the move, with the promise of meeting one of them from Korea, someone who was like them.

“Did this one try to blow himself up ?” Asked Imran.

“Yes, with three grenades fixed to his shirt.” Answered Sadie. “Then he went quiet on us.”

“So Max encouraged him to be talkative.” Said Isobel.

Delmar was in the front of the car with Sadie, the two lovebirds in the back. He noticed Sadie look a little shocked at what Isobel had just said. He was close to her, close enough to see a slight nervous tick over Sadie’s left eye.

“Don’t worry.” He said. “George hinted at what Max had done. We won’t look at your private thoughts.”

“Ruby has given us rules about that sort of thing.” Added Isobel.

“And you always obey her rules ?” Asked Sadie.

They scared her a little, which he considered to be a good thing.

“Usually.” He answered. “You’ll have to trust us. If we were inside your head, you’d never know it.”

Delmar left her alone to ponder on that, as he tried to ignore the unpleasant odour in the car. It had belonged to man, no woman would own a car that grubby, with so many old KFC boxes on the floor. Eventually Sadie parked in front of a double garage, which was connected to an unremarkable house in a quiet residential street.

“This is it.” She said. “I cleaned the place up a bit while Max was busy. There are enough beds, if you need to stay here for a few days.”

He felt the one from Rakwon, before he’d even entered the house and it was louder once Sadie had taken them into the kitchen. He was shouting for his people to come and get him, shouting with his mind. The mental noise was deafening and difficult to ignore.

“He’s upstairs, front bedroom.” Said Isobel. “We can hear him crying out with his mind.”

“Can they find him ? Can his people hear him ?” Asked Sadie. “Can anyone else hear it ?”

“No, his people are too far away.” Said Imran.

“Though you might have a garden full of cats by tomorrow.” Added Isobel.

Sadie looked agitated, the twitch above her eye began again.

“She’s joking.” Said Delmar. “Isobel likes to wind people up.”

“Crap ! Just trying to lighten things a little.” Said Isobel. “That’s the trouble with humans, no sense of humour.”

Max entered the kitchen, leaning heavily on a cane. Delmar had never actually met the man who’d been Ruby’s would be nemesis, but he had seen a few pictures. He’d expected someone larger, generally fiercer than the man in front of him.

“Stop teasing Sadie.” Said Max. “She’s not used to dealing with people with your gifts and takes everything you say as the truth.”

Max shook hands with all of them in turn, like a distant cousin they only met at funerals and Christmas.

“I am so pleased to meet you all.” Said Max. “We should go into the lounge and listen to the recordings of our friend upstairs. There’s hours of it, probably all useless, but you should listen to a little of it before talking to him.”

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More explosions in the woods near the river, she could see flames now, rising high up into the sky. More soldiers all the time, all finding something to shoot at or destroy. Hunters, harmless traders on

the move or maybe even just a few brown bears. The army were obviously finding something to use their weapons on. Trudy felt the minds of the soldiers and nearly all of them were worried about what their superiors might do, if the subversives weren't killed. Some missed their families, most were simply terrified of fucking up.

"There are thousands of them, more arriving all the time." She told Serge.

"Any where we intend to leave the river?"

"No, not yet. They might spread out though, nothing is certain."

"Your best guess will do." Said Terry. "They've been spot on in the past."

Trudy asked Lisa and then Roger, receiving a clear confirmation of her own analysis of the situation.

"The Chinese troops will spend several days examining the area and then fan out, looking for any tracks to follow." She said.

"Then we mustn't leave any." Said Serge.

There was just one small Jetty and a fishing boat was already moored against it. One of Terry's men had been a weekend boating fanatic in civilian life and had proven to be something of an expert at handling their geriatric fishing boat.

"Every light out, not a glimmer." Ordered Terry. "Not much of a current, but tie us up as soon as we touch."

"There's no one on board." Said Trudy.

Very gently they bumped the other boat, eager hands tying them fast against the river current. It took them just two minutes to leave their boat and walk to the end of the jetty. No moon, so they were forced to risk using flashlights.

"How far to the nearest soldiers?" Asked Terry.

"Far enough." She replied. "They won't see our lights, as long as we're careful and the village is deserted."

"Define careful?" Asked Serge.

"Turn your lights off immediately if any of us say so." Answered Lisa.

Terry's mercenaries were in their element now, merging into the landscape like shadows. Trudy could see them by their thoughts though and some of those still troubled her.

"You're our navigator Roger." Said Serge. "We need the nearest place there's likely to be a truck we can steal."

"Liberate you mean." Corrected Trudy.

Roger was pointing north, along the only proper road there was.

"Light industry probably means a fish packing plant." He said. "There should be vans though, hopefully one we can.....liberate."

They followed him along the road, using their flashlights to keep to the road. Trudy felt no one in the area, no one at all. It was worrying, it meant they'd stick out like a sore thumb.

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Imran felt not disgust when he saw what Max had done to his prisoner, but a deep sadness. The others too, he could tell from their expressions. It was all so unnecessary, all so undignified and achieved nothing. The man had talked, he hadn't stopped for hours, all of it useless. Isobel had told Max the simple truth.

"You hurt him so he talked and told you nothing of use for seven or eight hours." She'd said. "You should have brought him straight to Sarah's."

"I didn't know he was going to say everything in that strange word salad." Said Max.

"And we were worried about being followed." Added Sadie.

Imran walked up to the man tied to a simple wooden chair. No not tied, they'd used duct tape to bind his hands and ankles, before using more of it to hold him in place. No toilet breaks, the floor was awash with urine.

"We're not going to hurt you." Said Imran. "You know that, right?"

"His English isn't that good." Said Max.

"They all speak good English." Said Delmar. "You just scared him into talking in that crazy mix of languages."

Isobel produced a penknife from her pocket, extending the longest blade. It was one of those Swiss Army ones, given to her by Olga for her last birthday. The man flinched as she leant towards him.

"Don't be scared." She said. "I'm just going to cut the tapes."

"Not a good idea." Said Max. "They can be fast and one did kill Patrick."

Isobel ignored him, slicing through all the duct tape that held the man to the chair. Delmar turned on Max, real anger in his voice.

"You might prove to be more of a threat than him Max." He said. "Who did you think might be following you? Have you put us at risk?"

Imran ignored it all, helping Isobel to remove all the tape Max or Sadie had used to bind the man from Korea. Some removed hair as it was pulled off his skin, causing the prisoner to yell. They were still arguing, Max accusing Sadie of not taking enough care. Talk of using a dead guy's car, as it was unknown to MI5. Dead guys! MI5! Were they in a dead guy's house? It all seemed highly dangerous to Imran and he was sure George hadn't been told all the facts.

"We shouldn't be here." He told Isobel. "It's not safe."

"I know." She replied. "We're here now though and must make the best of it."

Their prisoner was difficult to remove from the chair, his various bodily fluids held him to it, like glue. He yelled as Imran pulled the chair off him, yet another pointless indignity. They took him to the bathroom, letting him move about as he pleased.

"We will both remain with you, no privacy I'm afraid." Said Isobel.

"You do know we won't hurt you?" Asked Imran.

"I know and you were right. My English is good, better than Max's."

They watched as he used the toilet and then showered, thoroughly cleaning every inch of his body. Sadie tried to enter the room once, Max's voice booming in the distance. Isobel shooed her away and they left the man from Rakwon, to get clean at his own pace. No clean clothes, clean towels had to do, wrapped round him like a toga.

"Now we'll go downstairs and you can sit properly, in an armchair." Said Imran. "I'll even get you a drink. Then you have to answer our questions."

"We could force you." Said Isobel. "We'd rather not have to though."

"I will tell you everything you want to know." Said the man from Rakwon.

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