

## Ruby 2

### Chapter 20 – Thirteen and a Bit

**“Don’t touch anything.” She said. “Das Geheimnis were never really big on health and safety. Anything here might take your arm off, kill you or blow us all into tiny pieces.”**

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Sir Edwin Fox, known as Foxy to just about everyone, was avoiding taking any calls. It was the early hours of the morning in Britain and his PA wasn’t due in for another four or five hours. The duty desk did their best to screen incoming calls, but the pesterers were still getting through.

“I’m sorry sir, but he said he was from the PMs Office.”

“That’s ok Wilks. Lily knows people’s voices, you don’t. Tell every caller that I’m out of the office and offer to put them through to my voicemail.”

“Yes sir.”

“And no more calls to be put through to me. Understood ?”

“Yes sir.”

Foxy was beginning to feel like someone who hadn’t paid their credit card account for a few months. The calls just kept coming in, one appearing on his voicemail within seconds. All security agencies seemed to leak like a sieve, apart from the Israeli’s for some reason, though no one had worked out why. The CIA seemed to be the worst for leaks, almost as though everything was posted on a wall somewhere. Not just the Americans calling him, but the French, the Germans, even his opposite number in Delhi. Foxy looked up Lily’s number on the personnel database and called her. Not really surprising considering the hour, he went straight through to her voicemail.

“Lily, yes I do know it’s only five twenty. Could you get in for eight today ? There’s a bit of a flap on, a full ten on the flap scale.”

His voicemail counter was already on six. Foxy turned the phone round to avoid seeing the ever growing number and watched the recording the man in Delhi had sent him. For some reason it was actually in higher definition than the CIA original, which he also had on his computer.

“Oh Ruby.” He muttered. “This alone is worth every favour I’ve ever done for you.”

Baba Yaga was on his computer screen, looking as though the camera had been on a helicopter, hovering a little above her. No one would think the high definition video had been taken from a satellite in outer space. He recognised her face, knew her real name was Kallina, though that too might well be a made up name. An AKA as the police called them, an Also Known As.

“That’s it Kallina, destroy it all, every bit of every building.”

Far better than any special effect, because it was real. The satellite had recorded the impossible and had even included the temperature and energy yield of each lightning bolt. Everyone wanted to talk to him now, they wanted access to the woman in the video. Not that he’d give them access to Kallina.

“Oh no young lady, you’re much too crazy.”

Access to Ruby was another thing though, as long as it was carefully controlled. He didn’t imagine Ruby would object, as long as she was protected and the money was good. The money would be very good, her product was unique. Foxy didn’t want money, he already had more than enough to live comfortably. Access to Ruby would buy the UK a seat at every table, intelligence better than anything available to them since the seventies. Even some nations who weren’t technically on the

UK's friends list, would be tempted to offer some tempting snippets of information. His personal cell phone beeped to tell him a text had been received. One line from Lily.

'Ok C U at 8.'

Foxy actually liked being around young people. They weren't jaded, there was none of that granite eyed cynicism that came with age. They were all energy, optimism and enthusiasm, on the whole. If only they'd stop doing such dire things to the English language. He'd already made up his mind to break at least a dozen rules and show Lily the video.

"Oh, you are going to love this. It'll blow your mind."

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Ruby had seen rooms full of advanced technology before. There had been secrets in the old Karakum City that mankind would kill for. Scientific advances had to be earned though and it had to be at a gradual pace.

"Mankind can never be given any of this." Kurt had once told her. "It would be like going back in time and giving the Romans automatic rifles and the atom bomb."

All the gleaming technology in the facility was useless without the centuries of knowledge that went into building it. Mankind didn't even have a vocabulary to deal with a good half of it. It all had to be destroyed of course, but that would happen after she'd found out the great secret. Kwan had been building something dreadful for Pyongyang and she still had no idea what that was.

"Some of this might be valuable." Said Sarah.

"Don't touch anything." She said. "Das Geheimnis were never really big on health and safety.

Anything here might take your arm off, kill you or blow us all into tiny pieces."

Sarah jumped back, as though the harmless lathe might bite her. Good! Her friend needed to be scared into doing as she was told. The doors at the far end of the workshop were open, jammed ajar by a steel framed chair.

"I think we're expected." Said Ruby.

Another wide corridor with scuffed tiles and another set of open doors. Pushed wide and held open by hooks on the wall this time. It was a tank room of some kind, rows upon rows of tanks. Two had a notice saying they contained liquid oxygen, most were unlabelled. It all looked quite ordinary, like a part of many research facilities around the world. The unusual thing was the two dead bodies in the centre of the room.

"Looks like they killed each other." Said Murad.

"So much blood." Said Sarah. "I'll never get used to this part."

There was a North Korean guard, his head crushed by a fire extinguisher, which was lying next to him. His assailant was dressed in laboratory whites; probably one of Kwan's gifted people. Had the guard shot the man first, or had he been attacked? It really didn't seem to matter now. Ruby checked all their pockets, finding nothing of any use.

'Kwan attacking guards.' Ruby transmitted. 'Found two bodies.'

Nothing, no response at all, just a little white noise. The comms were supposed to handle caves and basements.

"Dead, they must have a jammer or some kind of shielding." She said.

They were on their own, but Ruby had never intended to send for reinforcements. If she died in the facility, Olga had orders to take everyone home.

"Hell of a lot of high energy stuff in here." Said Murad. "Bound to screw with our comms."

"Maybe, I'll try again later."

Another set of wide doors and a choice to go left or right. Someone had scrawled a poorly drawn arrow, pointing left. At first Ruby thought it had been drawn using blood, but then realised it was red marker pen.

"Might as well take the hint." She said. "Left it is."

A short corridor, much narrower than any they'd been down previously. A single door at the end and a large room full of tables. A counter at one end and several stacks of trays. Ruby's head was so full of expectations of finding something made with advanced technology, that she didn't see the simple mundane truth.

"It's their cafeteria." Said Sarah.

"Someone made toast this morning." Added Murad.

He was right, the slight aroma of toasted bread still hung in the air. There was a choice of doors, the cafeteria seems to be a crossroads, six doors leading from it. Only one door was jammed open though, by what looked like another body.

"I'd have preferred more marker pen." She said. "It looks like we go that way."

The body of another guard and he had been used as a doorstep. On the door above his head, someone had written her name and an instruction.

'This way Ruby Mason. Not far now.'

"At least our side seem to be winning." Said Sarah.

If they were on their side. Ruby remembered Ju-Long on Jingdao Island. He'd seemed on her side at first, until it became clear that she intended to destroy his life's work. Would Kwan be on her side, if she tried to destroy everything in the facility? There was only one way to find out.

"Come on," she said, "our unknown sign writer says it's not far."

A short corridor with a set of double door at the end. Thin metal doors, set back into a rubber surround. Above the doors a red warning light was silently rotating. For the first time, there was a sign above the door.

"It says Danger and then Corrosive Materials." Said Sarah.

The power was still on, the rows of fluorescent lights in the lab still working. Ruby looked through the glass window in the door and saw bodies, lots of them.

"I don't think Kwan is winning anymore." She said. "Most of the dead are in civilian clothing or wearing lab coats."

It looked like a chemistry lab, lots of wooden benches and clamps holding various types of flasks. Ruby went up on tiptoes to see the floor and it was covered in broken glass, brown glass.

"Looks like they had a fight and some bottles were broken." She said.

"Containing what though?" Asked Murad.

"No biohazard signs that I can see, but they don't seem big on signs." Said Ruby.

There were hideous burns on some of the bodies, dark corrosive burns. Ruby regretted not learning more about chemistry at school, but remembered that nasty things tended to come in large bottles made from brown glass.

"We have to go on." She said. "Time to see if those expensive gasmasks were a good buy."

Her army of two volunteers didn't look happy, as they dug the masks out of their packs. Ruby helped them both, making sure the rubber was flat against their faces. Difficult with Sarah, making sure her hair was tucked right back. Murad then did the same for her. It all took much too long, but Ruby didn't want to end up like the poor devils in the lab. Her voice sounded strange, vaguely masculine, as she spoke to them through the gasmask.

“Follow me and don’t touch anything. We’re not going to examine any of the bodies. We’ll walk straight through and not touch.... ANYTHING !”

She glared at Sarah, knowing her friend had been born without a common sense gene. It was tough love, but it had often stopped Sarah from fucking up, bigtime.

“Ok, ok Ruby ! I’ll follow you and be good.”

There was a fairly simple lock on the door, just one right in the centre. Ruby only needed her strength and not her destructive powers. She put her palm against the lock and pushed it through the door, punching it out and across the lab. She rattled the door to make sure she hadn’t missed a second lock. The door moved easily towards her.

“Here we go ! Stay close.”

Ruby had to walk a zigzag to avoid broken jars, bottles and unsettling stains on the floor. Two large bottles hadn’t shattered, the labels still showed several lines in Korean and Bromine in English. Crap, Ruby remembered seeing a film on laboratory safety once. She stopped and pointed at the brown stain on the concrete floor.

“Bromine will burn to the bone.”

The message was understood, Sarah even put her hands in her pockets. There were other partial labels, showing chemical names she’d never heard of. Nearly everything had a warning label, a hand being burned by a liquid, the international symbol for something dangerously corrosive.

“Do you see Kwan ?” Asked Murad.

“He might be here.” She answered. “I’m not stopping to look though.”

They passed five people who looked like lab workers, all dead. Some had terrible chemical burns, but they all appeared to have been killed by gunfire. Most of the bodies had multiple wounds, all made by bullets entering and leaving their bodies.

“Now I understand.” She said. “There was a battle in here. Our side, if they are our side, didn’t do too badly.”

They’d been hidden by shelving, the bodies of at least a dozen guards. There might have been ten or maybe more than twelve. Highly corrosive chemicals had almost fused some of the bodies together, making a headcount problematic. The guards with their guns, versus Kwan’s gifted people, using their strength to throw carboys of deadly chemicals. One large green bottle had contained a thick viscous chemical, which had clung to their skins, burning through inches of flesh.

“Oh Christ !” Said Sarah. “I’m so glad we arrived after this was over.”

There was movement among the guards, an arm trying to move. As Ruby looked, a guard used his one remaining eye to blink at her. Covered in the viscous chemical, he probably wasn’t long for this world, but was wagging his arm to gain their attention.

“Ruby ! We have to help him.” Said Sarah.

It was the first time Ruby has used her brand new Glock automatic. It was a mercy killing she told herself, but there was no question of them wading through deadly chemicals to reach the guard. She fired twice, one round in his head the next in his heart.

“That’s fucking murder !”

“No Sarah, it’s survival. Come on, I can see the door.”

The lock on the door looked clean, but there was no need to take chances. Ruby dug her gloves out of her pack and used the same trick, punching the lock right through the door. Once outside she stopped and looked at her trainers. The rubber was fizzing a little in places, but showed no signs of melting.

“Show me your feet.”

Sarah did it petulantly, but she showed Ruby her shoes. Murad too, offered his shoes for inspection. They were both wearing decent quality trainers, which had resisted the corrosive chemicals. "Later we'll wash them off and remove them..... Very carefully." Said Ruby. The corridor turned to the left and they found Kwan leaning against the wall.

The shelter reminded Olga of pictures she'd seen of World War II Anderson Shelters. It was on a much larger scale though and probably chosen as a quick option to build.

"We never had a shelter," said Nari, "no one thought we needed one. Then the people in Pyongyang thought Ruby might be heading our way. The shelter was built out of corrugated iron and half covered in soil. The entire construction only took three days."

It looked flimsy and unlikely to survive even a nearby explosion. Earth was banked up against the sides, but the top of the shelter was just two layers of corrugated iron, bolted together. Olga didn't comment on its poor build, but Charlotte wasn't being polite.

"A shelter from the rain maybe." She said. "A direct hit from a bomb would flatten it and kill everyone inside."

"Kwan has made similar comments, but it is all we have." Replied Nari.

They'd tried to make the ugly building fit in with the rest of the village, or at least soften the image of an air raid shelter in the centre of where they lived. The path that led to the door had been given a layer of attractive tiles and pot plants placed around the entrance.

"Given time it will look more like a meeting place than a shelter." Said Nari.

Charlotte looked about to say something, so Olga grabbed her arm and hissed in her ear.

"Be polite Charlie, we're guests here."

Only artificial light inside, though someone had thought of using daylight bulbs. Rows of bunk beds and hard wooden chairs, it appeared designed to be functional rather than comfortable. They all seemed to be there, the entire population of Kwan's village, sitting on the beds or talking in groups. No one looked happy to see them.

"They're grieving." Said Sophie. "I can feel it and something else."

"Everyone is terrified." Added Charlotte.

"Your presence isn't helping; they don't know what to make of you. Come, we've made an area of the shelter a little more comfortable." Said Nari.

Behind rows of bunk beds, they'd created something quite homely. Several sofas with tables scattered about, even a few standard lamps to give a more cosy level of lighting. Nari ignored them for a while, picking up a tiny new born child out of a carry cot.

"They know many of their friends are dead." Said Sophie. "Everyone who went with Kwan, they feel every death when it happens."

"How about Kwan?" Asked Olga.

"Alive, but there is a lot of pain in his thoughts. I'm picking up his mind too, there is so much pain. There is perhaps some good news, he's with Ruby now."

Olga hadn't been that surprised when their new and expensive comms system, decided not to work underground. Military equipment often promised far more than it delivered. All part of the problem of awarding contracts to the lowest bidder. It was nice to have confirmation that Ruby was alive though.

"How about Sarah and Murad?" She asked.

"I think Kwan is close to death." Said Sophie. "His thoughts are too jumbled for me to see any details."

Sophie took the bazooka off her back and for a moment it looked like she might actually sit on one of the comfy sofas. Not Sophie though, she lovingly placed her bazooka on the sofa, while she went off to make baby noises at Nari's child. Charlotte joined in, while Olga stood back and watched. It wasn't that she didn't have the usual maternal instincts, she just kept them well buried. Children needed stability and her life had been anything but stable. She did try to join in;

"Boy or a girl?" She asked.

"Oh Olga! She's wearing pink." Said Charlotte.

Was that still a thing? Olga seemed to remember a friend telling her the colour gender thing was over. That had been in New York, not in rural North Korea. Nari held her child up, showing her to them.

"Meet Seong, my daughter."

It was difficult to be too gushing about a tiny sleeping baby, covered in a shawl, but Olga tried.

"She's beautiful." She said.

"So tiny!" Added Sophie.

Nari laughed and put her baby in a kind of pouch device, which went around her waist. It was obvious that she intended to take her child with her, wherever she was going.

"In a way Seong is everyone's child." Said Nari. "We're all descended from the same four ancestors, share the same blood. Babies are now rare and very precious to the entire village."

Oh dear, something was coming, something her new friends wouldn't like. Olga didn't need super powers to know that Nari was leading up to something.

"I'd like you to take me to see Kwan." She said. "I fear that my husband hasn't long to live."

Olga shook her head.

"Our orders were to protect you and the others. There might be Korean soldiers who knew Kwan swapped sides. They could well be looking to take their revenge on his people.... You!"

"Please! He needs to see his child again and I need to see him. Please!"

"You want to take the baby with you?" Asked Charlotte.

Nari was upset, one of the other women in the shelter answered for her.

"It is our way, a long tradition that is important to our beliefs. Kwan needs to pass on a part of himself to his daughter. Otherwise the child won't flourish."

Damn religion was always impossible to beat in an argument. Olga knew that it was either tie Nari up, or help her.

"Charlotte, will you stay here and look after them?" Aske Olga.

"You're taking her? And the child?"

"Trust me Charlie! Once someone talks about their beliefs, you're not going to change their minds.

I'll go with Sophie, if you're happy to stay here?"

She could see that Charlotte just didn't understand, her mind was too logical to understand the stubbornness of those with a belief system. She nodded at her though.

"Fine, I'll guard the door. Sophie's bazooka might be useful though, if I can borrow it?"

Sophie gave the ammunition bag to Charlotte and pointed at the massive weapon.

"Put it to good use and try not to damage it." She said.

It was quite refreshing to watch, as Nari picked up one bag of baby things and was ready to go. Olga had friends with young babies and their visits were often like the circus arriving in town. So many bags, devices and enough chemicals to fill a cupboard.

"Don't run." Olga told Nari. "Running is dangerous, there are holes, maybe even unexploded shells. Walk at a sensible pace and we'll keep close to you."

Nari led, carrying her baby against her chest. Olga kept to her right, while Sophie kept back a little, feeling the area for any surviving enemy soldiers.

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It wasn't safe to hug Kwan, his clothing and skin was covered in an assortment of chemicals and deep burns. Most worrying was a steady stream of bloody mucus, coming from his nose. She'd pulled his image from the mind of the man in Finchley, the image of a handsome middle aged man with a dignified countenance. The man lying on the floor looked the same, but his face was contorted by pain.

"Don't touch me !" He said. "I'll show you the way, then you must do it alone now Ruby Mason. Remember you are the key that can stop it all."

Miraculously he stood, though Ruby didn't know how he was doing it. As he turned, she saw a large area of his back was eaten away. Bromine probably, his ribs were actually exposed.

"Sit down Kwan, you need to rest." She said. "I can find the way."

"No, you need me for the door. Come on, we need to hurry ! Death has waited patiently for me for over a thousand year, but he is now quite close."

They followed him, along yet another corridor, that ended in a door unlike any other they'd seen. Kwan was coughing up blood, but still able to speak.

"Six inches of reinforced titanium and stainless steel, with a heat sink." He said. "Even you would find this door a challenge Ruby Mason. Bought from a supplier in the USA, paid enough to ignore the sanctions and embargoes."

He put his eye against a lens and pressed a large green button. Somewhere there was a beeping sound, which seemed to please him. He then put his thumb on a fingerprint reader and there was no reassuring beep.

"Damn !"

It worked on the third try and the door swung open. Ruby had expected more corridors, more doors, more dreadful scenes of violence. They were there though, the silo with its rows of intercontinental ballistic missiles, was hers to enter. Kwan had slumped against the wall, but he wasn't dead yet. Ruby felt his thoughts and they were full of fire, pain and death.

"Where to ?" Asked Sarah.

"There must be a control room."

She didn't like leaving Kwan on his own, but didn't like to admit it. All that way to meet him and it looked as though he'd die before they could have a proper conversation. She asked Murad to guard the door and added;

"..... and look after Kwan."

Just her and Sarah now, they walked through a silo full of lethal looking missiles. Tall weapons of mass destruction, they almost touched the ceiling way above their heads. Someone in military intelligence was bound to ask her how many missiles one day and for an idea of their dimensions. There was no time for her to bother with all that, they had to find the control room.

"The ceiling must fold back or something." Said Sarah.

"It must do, or slide to one side. Look for an emergency exit Sarah, we'll probably be running when we leave here."

"There !"

A door with large red Korean characters over the door. She didn't need Sarah to tell her the red characters over a door framed in red, said Emergency Exit. Some things were universally understood.

A little further and metal stairs led up to a gantry, right up near the ceiling. Again Sarah earned her keep, reading a small sign on the stairs.

"Secondary control room access." She read. "Not to be used during launch cycle."

"Then we'd better not launch anything." Said Ruby.

It was a stiff climb up the gantry and Ruby was almost shot in the forehead. She leant forward, to put her back into the climb and a bullet went over the top of her head. A lone guard, obviously told to keep the control room free of insurgents. Her own pistol was in a holster, fastened down with velcro. Sarah got him though, one bullet to his chest and another in his shoulder. He wasn't dead, just making a hell of a lot of noise as he screamed.

"Shut up, or the next is in your head !" Shouted Sarah, in perfect Korean.

A threat totally unlike Sarah, maybe her best friend was finally toughening up. The control room was quite small, two seats in front of about three computer screens. The wounded guard was quiet now and reaching for his dropped gun. Ruby stamped on his hand and dragged him to the far corner of the room.

"Tell him to behave and keep quiet Sarah."

While Sarah gave the orders to the Korean guard, Ruby looked at the control panel. Everything was in Korean symbols, not a solitary western character to be seen. Now she understood why some kind of sixth sense and made her bring Sarah into the missile bunker.

"I need a lady who speaks Korean."

Sarah was actually slapping the guard to make sure he understood. It was out of character, something was upsetting her.

"Are you alright ?"

"What they did to Kwan Ruby ! His back.... The bastards !"

"Ok, calm down now and tell me what sets off the self-destruct device."

"If there is one."

"Kurt mentioned it three times in his notes... there definitely is one."

Sarah looked over the keyboard and pressed what looked like the usual elongated enter key on most keyboards. One of the screens gradually woke up and brightened, showing a menu of some kind.

"It all looks so ordinary." Said Ruby.

"What do you expect Ruby ? A monitor shaped like a skull or something ?"

"Well it's just that..... I expected something more sinister I guess. Considering these missiles could easily destroy most of the known world."

Sarah was about to press a key, but hesitated.

"Really ?"

"Yes, I'm not exaggerating. You still need to find the right menu to set off the self-destruct though."

Sarah pressed several keys, ending up at a menu with a red edge.

"Is that it ?"

"No Ruby, it's just the administrator sub-system."

Several more menus, until a screen came up with no menu, just a single line of Korean symbols.

"Is that it ?"

"Yes Ruby, that is the command line to blow up the entire facility." Said Sarah. "Once we've been through all the inevitable password screens of course."

Sarah pressed a few more keys, eventually stopping and turning towards Ruby.

"Kwan seems to have altered the system." Said Sarah. "It's asking for the Facility Director's Authorisation Key."

Ruby didn't even need to think about it.

"Kwan said I was the key and kept using my full name. Can you type Ruby Mason in Korean symbols?"

"I can try it phonetically."

Sarah tapped away, backspacing and re-entering a few characters. She pressed the enter key and nothing happened.

"No, that not it." She said. "It doesn't say, but I'm guessing we only get a few tries at this. Any other ideas?"

"It has to be that Sarah. We could go back and ask him, if he isn't dead by the time we get there."

"Hang on!"

Sarah was looking at the keys and smiling.

"Of course, Ruby as in the gem and Mason as in one who works with stone."

Her friend pressed a few keys and yet another prompt came up on the screen.

"Are you sure?"

Ruby inwardly sighed.

"Really?!"

"Sorry Ruby."

Sarah pressed a Korean symbol and then return. There were another three screens which she went through quite quickly, probably yet more confirmation screens. She stopped at a screen which had several rows of text.

"This is it." Said Sarah. "Press return and it's irreversible. Thirty minutes from now, explosive charges will destroy everything."

"Can you reduce the time?"

"No, there's no option to do that. Do I press return?"

There was one box on the screen. A pinkish coloured box, blinking, waiting for a return key to be pressed. Sarah didn't know what was contained in the warheads of the missiles, but Ruby did. A heavy liquid that was difficult to manufacture and then required years of purification and further distilling. No wonder Kwan had taken so long to give Pyongyang their missiles.

"Kurt knew what they'd used in the missiles Sarah. Water of the Gods some called it, though most called it the water of death."

"Ruby, you're scaring me! Maybe you should press the return key."

Sarah moved away from the keyboard.

"There is just a few ounces in each missile." Said Ruby. "It will run away once they're destroyed, quickly becoming too contaminated to be of any danger."

Sarah was holding her arm.

"What does this water of death do?"

"So little Sarah, so little is needed. Karkum technology can turn every molecule to pure energy. Total conversion of matter to energy. A huge explosion Sarah! A destructive power that makes plutonium look like a toy."

Ruby pressed the return key and a timer started on the screen. The words under it were in Korean, but the numbers began at thirty minutes.

"Come on, we can contact the others when we get to the surface." Said Ruby.

"Do we take him with us?"

"Crap! The guard, I'd forgotten about him. You didn't do a very good job of shooting him."

The wound in his shoulder was bleeding more than the one in his chest. Ruby wasn't sure if that was a good sign or a bad one. He was obviously in pain, but still awake and alert.

"We can't just leave him to get blown up." Said Sarah.

"Shit ! I'm not carrying him. Tell him Sarah ! Tell him he has to get up on his feet or get blown to bits."

The guard managed to get up, even if he did need to lean heavily against a wall. Ruby relented on her threat and helped him, almost carrying him out of the control room and down the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs they found Murad and Kwan.

"Sorry he insisted on crawling this far." Said Murad. "Just in case you needed help with the key code."

"It was a puzzle that Sarah worked out."

Kwan looked finished, as he lay on the concrete floor of the silo. His voice was quiet now, but still clear.

"Did you do it Ruby Mason ?"

"Yes I did it. We need to get out of here before the self-destruct device goes off."

What to do about Kwan though ? Ruby was just planning how to use everyone's jackets as some kind of stretcher, when they heard Nari's voice and then an angry Sophie.

"He's near, I can feel my husband !"

"Stop running Nari, it's dangerous in here."

Olga was there too, running up behind Nari and holding her back. They'd all seen Kwan, lying on the floor, covered in hideous chemical burns.

"Let me go !" Shouted Nari. "I need to see him ! My daughter needs to be close to her father."

"You can't hug him." Said Ruby. "He's covered in too many lethal chemicals."

"I'm not stupid, I know that. Seong just needs to be near her father to receive his essence."

It was all nonsense to Ruby, yet Olga seemed to understand.

"It's one of their religious observances Ruby. Probably best to let her do as she wishes."

"Fine, but do it quickly. We only have about twenty seven minutes to avoid being here when the whole place explodes."

Ruby was still holding the guard. It was easier to keep him on his feet than try to lift him off the floor. He'd winced a few times coming down the stairs, but was now actually smiling at Kwan and Nari. Maybe he'd survive being shot by Sarah after all ? Nari was knelt two feet or so from Kwan, holding her baby out to be seen.

"Kwan, this is your daughter Seong. I ask that you pass on your gift to her."

It was all over so fast, that it probably required Das Geheimnis sight to see it happen. Kwan opened his mouth and several yellow tendrils crossed the distance to his daughter's face and vanished. It all happened in the tiniest fraction of a second.

"I thought it would just be some kind of ceremony." Said Ruby.

"The transfer of essence is very real." Said Nari. "Now Kwan is dead and I know there is no time to mourn him properly."

"What happened ?" Asked Sarah. "Is Kwan dead ?"

"Yes he is." Said Ruby. "I'll tell you what I saw later. Come on, we need to get to the emergency exit."

Nari was putting Seong back into her carry pouch, when the guard began to laugh. He pulled away from Ruby, pulling a knife out of his jacket. The man who'd seemed at death's door, showed

remarkable strength. All the time he yelled out in Korean. As he tried to stab Ruby, he was shot by Olga. Three bullets in his chest, he was dead before he hit the floor.

“What was he yelling ?” Asked Ruby.

Nari was looking distraught, he must have said something terrible.

“He said we haven’t won.” Said Sarah. “He may have been lying about it Ruby. He said they left a present for Kwan and his people, under the new shelter.”

“A bomb ?”

“Yes, a big one. The timer is activated if Kwan ever dared to use the self-destruct device. The missiles will be destroyed, but it will cost the lives of the entire village.”

They’d already lost valuable minutes and something else was worrying Ruby. She grabbed hold of Nari, none too gently.

“Listen ! Calm down. You need to follow me and get your child to safety.”

“Yes, but your child is still there, in the shelter.”

“Charlotte is guarding them.” Said Sophie. “With my bazooka.”

Ruby had already guessed that. Nari was calm now as they all ran towards the emergency exit. Ruby kept trying the comms unit as they ran.

‘Charlotte ! If you can hear me, get everyone out of the shelter ! There is a bomb !’

“No luck ?” Asked Olga.

“No, piece of shit ! Did the guard mention a time Sarah ?”

“No.”

Stairs ! Of course there’d be stairs. No emergency exit was ever a lift, unless you fancied being buried alive in one. The surface wasn’t that far, but Ruby could run faster than most of the others.

“Get Nari out !” She yelled. “I’m going to find Charlotte.”

“Me too !” Said Sophie. “I can run fast.”

Ruby almost told her to stay with the other, but decided that taking her was quicker than arguing.

“Ok, stay close and keep up.”

Ruby zigzagged up the staircase, always hoping the next turn would bring her to the exit door. The others were below her, their footsteps echoing off the concrete walls. The exit had a keypad, which she ignored. One good shove with both hands and she was outside, Sophie right behind her.

“That way.” Said Sophie.

“I know I can feel her and the others.”

She used the comms system again, constantly trying, hoping that her voice might be heard by Charlotte.

‘Go Charlotte ! Run ! Get away from the shelter !’

Over and over she repeated the same thing. It had to be the comms system. Useless piece of shit, she’d go back to Vladivostok and ram it down his throat.

‘Olga outside with others.’ She heard. ‘Moving fast towards the west.’

The system worked ! So why the fuck wasn’t Charlotte responding ?

“There !” Yelled Sophie. “I can see the iron roof.”

Ruby saw the explosion and the wave of intense emotion hit her. The sudden and violent death of two hundred of her own kind. It wasn’t just debilitating, her whole nervous system wanted to shut down.

“No, no, I refuse to lose another child !”

Ruby fell to her knees, trying not to vomit and gasp for breath at the same time. The dying thoughts and confused emotions of Kwan’s people, refused to leave her head. Ruby gave into it for a few

minutes, waiting until she had control of her body again. She hugged Sophie, who seemed to be taking longer to recover.

"Is she.....?" Asked Sophie.

"I don't know Sophie. There was so much pain in my head !"

~ ~  
~ Six Months Later ~

Ruby had gone straight back to working for George. Partly because she felt guilty for ruining his hopes of making a fortune in China, but it also helped her forget all those emotions that had gone through her mind. Yet another major nation had voted to leave the European Union and the situation in America showed no signs of improving.

'Getting close to civil war.' Said more than one headline.

It was awful, it was terrible, it also meant it was a good time to be a telepathic empath. Financial markets in turmoil meant trillions being moved around the globe. Knowing in advance where money was being moved, could be worth millions, maybe billions. Ruby had attended a few meetings as George's PA and pulled a lot of information out the heads of financiers, bankers and hedge fund managers. Easy money ! George had stopped when his profits reached a billion, pounds not dollars or the newly devalued Euro. There had been a few headlines in the financial papers.

'Polandrous Foundation back on form - George Polandrous regains Midas touch.'

A few headlines were good, too many and there might be rumours about insider dealing. George stopped before becoming too greedy and Ruby had her commission on the deals. In her own version of morality it was fair. She'd done her bit for Queen and Country and was due a decent payday.

'Hedge funds making fortunes from misery.'

It had said in one of the tabloids. Once it might have bothered her, but now she knew that no one really understood the whole truth. As Kallina had often said.

"Unless they've seen what I've seen over the centuries and done the things I've done. Then I don't care what they think. No one has the right to judge me."

It was a Friday evening and Ruby was hosting a kind of reunion, which sadly not everyone had been able to attend. Serge had returned home in style with his team, on a scheduled flight home from Vladivostok. He was supposed to have come to her get together, but had seen a house he wanted to buy near Toulon. George was providing the finance, on one of his zero interest and pay when you remember schemes. Serge deserved it though, he'd brought her young adults home in piece, after the trouble in Harbin.

"I might as well order some food." Said Spider. "How about some Thai from one place and Pizza from another ?"

"I don't care where they come from." Said Charlotte. "We must have samosas though, lot of them."

"And Jalfrezi !" Yelled Sophie. "I have a thing lately for Indian food."

Spider was making notes on the back of one of her cereal boxes and obviously losing track of what people wanted.

"Peel Imran off Isobel and get him to help." Said Ruby. "He's good at it and knows the best takeaways in Hackney..... Oh and we need lots of beer too."

Imran and Isobel were still inseparable. Ruby was no longer too worried about them interbreeding, but she wasn't about to encourage it. At best it had led to a dilution of their abilities, for Kwan's people.

"At least none of them were monsters." She mumbled.

"Who are monsters ?" Asked Charlotte.

“No one. How are you healing ?”

“I think this is as good as I’m going to get. You have scars too, don’t you ?”

“Yes, they even replicated with me.”

Charlotte had been lucky. She’d spotted a Korean soldier and had moved away from the shelter to deal with him. Everyone else in the shelter had died though and Charlotte had been left with some terrible wounds. No instant healing, no replication. Poor Charlotte had gone through weeks of pain. There was even a scar below her left ear, a nasty ugly scar to remind her she was mortal after all. Ruby had lost Patrick and gained Nari to replace him. She’d left with thirteen super people and still had thirteen. Yes they’d destroyed all those terrible weapons, but she’d hoped for so much more. Actually it wasn’t thirteen....

“Tell Spider what you want to eat Nari.” She yelled.

“Samosas will be fine.”

Nari had her child on her lap, the daughter of her and Kwan. The child was still an unknown. The girl might turn out to be quite ordinary, or someone with extraordinary gifts. Only time would tell. As George had told her after one of their trips into town.

“You came back with thirteen and a bit Ruby.”

Spider was back in the kitchen with Imran, dividing up the tasks, deciding who called where. Ruby poured herself a glass of wine and left them to it. Isobel followed Imran into the kitchen, as if held to him by an invisible cord.

“Any news on Terry ?” She asked.

“No, his people used a contact of George’s for a place to stay for about four weeks. The mercenaries made it home eventually, but there’s still no news about Terry.”

She went to fill her glass and felt the brooch in her pocket. The gold brooch with the portentous words on it in a long dead language. She pulled it out.

“That thing.” Said Spider. “What did it do in the end ?”

“Nothing Spider, nothing at all. Some ancient saying written on the useless thing about keeping it because it was important and the damn thing was never needed.”

She threw it onto the kitchen table, watching as it changed in mid-air. She’d thrown a simple brooch, but a complex device landed on the table.

“Wow ! I think you upset it.” Said Spider.

“Careful, it might be dangerous.” Said Imran. “Baba Yaga might know what it is.”

Ruby thought she might, but Kallina had vanished again and might turn up in three weeks, three years or three decades. Ruby looked at the device, it resembled a sextant of some kind, there was even a small eyepiece.

“Careful Ruby.” Said Nari.

“Will everyone stop telling me to be careful. I think I can handle a piece of Karakum junk in my own kitchen !”

It was glowing inside, a pale blue light that showed between the struts of pure gold.

“Flip the light switch someone !”

Not complete darkness, the curtains were open and her flat was near a lamppost. Ruby looked into the eyepiece and saw a mountain. Not just a mountain, but animals too and miles of grassland. She knew where it was, had seen it in several recurring dreams. She stood up.

“All that time, just thinking my mind was telling me to take a vacation.” She muttered.

The lights came on, to reveal a full kitchen and lots of people looking at her. No Sarah of course, she was late, as usual.

“What did you see ?” Asked Eugenie.

“The rift valley, where it all began. I think we’ve just received an invitation.”

~ ~

~ The End ~

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There will be lots more Ruby books, the next will begin in the summer of 2018.