

Ruby 2

Chapter 15 – The Hongüi Line

“Tempting to hit him with his gun, but that only rendered people temporarily unconscious in movies and TV shows. Do it in real life and your source of information can get a brain bleed and die on you.”

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By the time they left the tomb, the sun was rising over that part of Southern China. One of Terry’s guys had lugged a box of face masks across China; it was on a list that Ruby had given someone, at some point that seemed an age before. Dust was still settling, dust which caused their scintillation counters to jump around. Their clothes could be shaken to remove the dust, but not their lungs. Serge was grateful for the simple dust mask. Trudy was stood next to him, surveying the devastation that she had caused by calling down the thunder.

“How do you guys do that ?” He asked.

“If I told you, you’d say it was simple and obvious.”

He looked at her expecting her to continue. Instead she just grinned at him and kissed his cheek. There was nothing left of the train yard, just a few twisted rails among hundreds of broken trees. There had been no trees for miles though, none at all. Serge realised the extent of the blast, when he looked further away and saw nothing but barren terrain. The trees had been blown over and sucked in behind the blast, it was the only thing that made sense.

“How far does the destruction go ?” He asked.

“Difficult to be certain.” Answered Roger. “Probably five to ten miles in every direction.”

Everyone sounded slightly robotic, talking through the masks. It made the whole situation more surreal. The area hadn’t been exactly lush, but there had been weeds and a few Buddleia bushes. Now everything around them was a uniform grey, with the occasional area of brown.

“Crap ! This will have grabbed everyone’s attention.” Said Terry.

“Not even any bird sounds.” Said Matt.

The devastated landscape was silent, their footsteps the only sound made by a living creature. How many casualties ? Serge didn’t want to ask, in case the ever knowledgeable Roger, gave him a terrifying number.

“We should leave here.” Said Lisa. “The radiation levels are too high for us to hang around.”

“I sense it too.” Added Roger. “Like a tingle in my ears.”

“How far is it above a safe level ?” Asked Terry.

“There is no such thing as a safe level.” Answered Trudy. “We should be many miles away from here before nightfall.”

Where to though, the original plan had been to head back north, probably on the railways. Now there was no railway and a lot of angry Chinese soldiers would be arriving soon.

“Where to though ?” Asked Serge. “North is now out of the question and there’s a lot of China to cross if we go east. How about south ?”

“You mean into North Korea ?” Asked Terry. “That is the way they’ll be expecting us to go !”

Trudy was nodding furiously at Serge.

“Not into North Korea.” She said. “Just as far as the Yalu River and find a boat to take us towards Dandong.”

“We can convince any boat crew to help us.” Added Lisa.

“Better than trudging through the mountains.” Said Matt.

Terry glared at Matt, he’d obviously reach the point of not appreciating helpful comments from his men.

“I still think it’s dangerous to go south.” He said. “But we don’t seem to have much option. How far is it ?”

They all looked at Roger. It was evident that he’d now become the official navigator for the group.

“About five miles across fairly decent terrain.” Said Roger. “We can easily be at the river by nightfall. There are a few jetties, where we should be able to take over some kind of boat.”

“That is the edge of the destruction zone.” Added Trudy. “With luck, we might find an abandoned vessel.”

Was it still Terry’s operation ? Serge had brought the kids and without them, there would have been no spectacular explosion. It was tempting to simply pick up his gear and head south, but he didn’t want to split the group.

“Your worries are noted Terry.” He said. “But we need to get moving.”

“Fine !”

Matt just rolled his eyes and the rest of Terry’s hired mercenaries just looked bored. They all followed Roger as he walked slightly east of due south, across the blasted landscape and towards the Yalu River.

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Max Krause walked slowly across the upstairs hallway and knelt down. That simple decision definitely saved his life. His head was only about a foot off the floor as he looked into the room. The man from the village near Rakwon, had expected someone to walk through the door, someone with a head at the usual height. He hesitated, obviously confused and his two shots went wide. Normally Max would have killed the man from North Korea, but the information in his head might be important. Personally, he thought Ruby had been too quick to write off the other one as a potential source of information. The one now in his old prison in the Yemen, the one that Baba Yaga had simply dumped there. Ruby was too squeamish about using pain to obtain information and she’d been too pre-occupied about taking the kids to North Korea. Max wasn’t worried about the UN convention against torture. It was against inhuman or degrading acts too and made a special point about excessive punishment. Max saw it all as some sort of personal insult.

“If we can’t beat them up a little, they’ll never tell us anything useful !”

He’d once told his CIA controller. His opinions had been the norm in those days, but now things had changed. Max just saw it as a sign of the west becoming far too soft.

“You’ll see ! When they’re coming over your garden wall in the middle of the night. You’ll wish we’d been a bit more persuasive with our interrogation techniques.”

Max had given his views to a lot of senior people at the CIA and other security organisations. No one was really sure who Max meant by the ‘they’ and he’d been given early retirement. Ironically, Max had been hired back as a consultant, for operations that did require some of his pragmatic attitude to the UN rules.

Max took off his right shoe and threw it into the room. It was an old trick he was almost ashamed to use, yet it always worked. Another shot, as the man from the village fired at the harmless shoe. Max was betting his life on the man being slow and poorly trained. One day he might lose the bet, but not there in that house in Cricklewood. The man still had his gun pointed toward the window, as Max ran into the room. He could still run by ignoring the pain in his leg, he’d just pay for it later. The man saw Max and reached into his jacket.

“Oh no you don’t !”

Tempting to hit him with his gun, but that only rendered people temporarily unconscious in movies and TV shows. Do it in real life and your source of information can get a brain bleed and die on you. Max grabbed him, pulling his gun out of his hands, ripping his jacket off and then turning the man over. He was still out of condition and breathing heavily, as Sadie came to help him.

“I don’t enjoy this is much as I used to.” She said.

“Bind his hands ! He was reaching for something.”

Nylon tie to bind his wrists and then another round his ankles, to stop him kicking. Sadie was much faster at it than he ever was. Finally they picked him up and shoved him into a chair. There were three grenades, stitched in some way to the front of his shirt.

“Good job we were pre-warned.” Said Sadie.

She used a knife to expertly slice his entire shirt along the seams and remove it, dumping the dangerous homemade suicide vest in a corner of the room. Their prisoner was thin to the point of malnutrition and looking terrified.

“His gun had quite a bark Max, we should take him and go.” Said Sadie.

“I’ll get the car.” Said Max. “Find a coat or something to cover him up and don’t untie his ankles until the last possible moment.”

“I know Max, I have done this before !”

She wasn’t glaring at him or anything, just firing a warning shot about his attitude. Max knew he wasn’t handling stress as well as he used to, but didn’t know how to get back, whatever it was he’d lost.

“Sorry ! I’ll get the car.”

The street was quiet as he left, but three gunshots wasn’t something to be ignored. Behind one of the sets of net curtains, a bored housewife would be aiming her smartphone camera at him.

Probably more than one bored housewife. The police would turn up eventually of course, but not until they’d left with their prisoner. Max started the hire car and drove to the front of the ordinary terraced house in Larch Road. No hooting the horn, Sadie would be watching for his arrival.

Sadie pushed the man out first, he could see her hissing threats into his ear. What did you use to threaten someone who was quite prepared to die before talking ? Whatever she said, it seemed to work. Dressed in an overcoat about four sizes too big, he allowed her to shove him into the back of the car. Sadie climbed in next to him, keeping a firm hold of his arm.

“What did you threaten him with ?” He asked.

“I told him what you’d do to him if he was..... difficult.”

Max laughed and drove away at a sensible speed. They’d be there of course, hidden behind the net curtains, noting the make and registration number. In many ways, it used to be better operating inside the iron curtain. No one ever saw anything, and certainly never passed information to the authorities.

“I might as well throw away the fake ID I used to hire the car.” Said Sadie.

“They’ll know it was us.” He said. “I did report the address to MI5.”

“So, if we can’t go home, where do we take him ?” She asked.

Where indeed ? Max looked at their prisoner in the rear view mirror and decided the terrified man had to know something. They needed somewhere he could interrogate the North Korean properly, somewhere a little extra mess wouldn’t matter. The solution came to him in a flash. The home of Raymond Phelps was there to be used. An ex policeman and PI, a bit of a loner. No visitors and neighbours who’d learned to ignore him, perfect !

“There is somewhere.” He said. “Even a large garage attached to the house.”

“Is it far ?”

“Essex, not too far with the afternoon traffic. It’ll need a bit of a tidy up when we arrive.”

She was looking at him now, her head slightly on one side, waiting for a little more information.

“We’ll need to bag up and bury the previous occupant.” He said.

“I’ll give you this Max..... you are consistent !”

Max laughed and tried to remember how to get from Cricklewood to Chingford. There was no using the SatNav of course, they tended to keep everything in memory.

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Getting the money out of Simon had been easy, as had inflicting enough pain to get their message across.

“Billy wants you out of London, Simon.” He’d told him. “I hear they love the new designer drugs in Leeds and a move there might be good for your health.”

Spider didn’t do follow up visits, he didn’t offer extended warranties on his threats and menaces.

Simon would either move out of town, or the next visit would be by someone harder than Spider. If he was lucky, Simon would be eating hospital food for a while. If he was unlucky, the regulars at his local pub would be organising a collection for a wreath. Billy got his portion of the money and Spider forgot all about that piece of business. Until Billy had called, asking to meet the kids.

“Simon left on a train that night Spider, I’m impressed and as you know, I’m not easily impressed. I think a little bonus is in order and bring your two helpers.”

There was a well-rehearsed back story to explain why he had two young adults under his care.

Spider had liked the idea of saying he was part on a vocational college course, but Ruby had vetoed that idea. Like all good lies, the agreed story wasn’t that far from the truth.

“They’re not helpers Billy, they’re students. I’ve got a bit of space and the local college pays me to put them up. Nice little earner to be honest.”

“I’ve heard different Spider. My contacts tell me your students are pretty good at getting money out of people and I’d like to meet them.”

“Students get bored; we all know what they’re like.”

He laughed, but Billy wasn’t laughing with him.

“They go round with me Billy, that’s all. Someone with younger legs to send for a Thai takeaway.”

The elderly gangster sighed down the phone, never a good sign.

“Don’t lie to me Spider; you know I don’t like people who lie to me. I don’t care what you have going on with these kids, I just want to meet them. It might mean more work for you. I take it you’d like more work from me ?”

“Yes Billy, that would be great.”

Actually the idea scared the crap out of him, but no one ever said no to Billy. More work meant more chances to screw something up and having to move to Leeds.

“Good Spider, good. Bring them to the club tonight, about eight.”

He’d told them about being invited to the pub that Billy always referred to as his club. After hours drinks and a glitter ball in the public bar, didn’t turn a sleazy back street pub into a club. The kids didn’t hear his warnings or comments, they just heard about being invited out. Now he was stood in his lounge, looking at two overdressed young adults. Monique was wearing a little black dress and looked sensational in it. Fabio was wearing a suit, Spider didn’t even know he owned one. Worst of all in a way, Mary had invited herself along.

“It’s not as if I have any delusions about where your money comes from !” She’d told him.

Mary Dwyer had the looks and the voice to charm anyone. Spider still found it hard to believe that she agreed to have sex with him, often initiating their sessions in his bed. Not as often as he'd have liked of course, but they'd reached that stage where sex after a date was taken for granted. Mary was wearing a tight cream dress, that was guaranteed to please Billy.

"I've heard of him." Mary said. "I'm also sure he knows my history. It'll be nice to meet your work colleagues."

Mary knew how to play the game and Fabio was usually as good as gold. Monique was the worry; she reacted strangely to events, often seeming to be a little disturbed. What was normal for them though? The kids had gone through the centuries the easy way, kept in stasis for most of the year. That had to ruin the social skills people usually picked up from normal human interactions. But the kids weren't human! He touched her arm and beckoned her into the back room, the room now home to their bird. She misinterpreted his motives, but seemed pleased.

"Did this dress finally work?" She asked.

She leant towards him, a look on her face that said she wouldn't run away if he kissed her. A few months before he'd have given in to his hormones and kissed her, maybe invited her into his bed that night. Now there was Mary and married or not, she was more than enough for him to deal with. He turned his head slightly and kissed Monique on the cheek.

"Oh Spider! When you're old a grey, you'll look back on this as a great mistake."

"I'm sure I will."

Crap! Parts of his body were already regretting his decision.

"I wanted to warn you about Billy." He said. "He can be a bit difficult and you might feel a need to react to him, in a direct way."

"I know Spider, I'm not stupid! If he pinches my bottom, I mustn't slap his face or break his jaw."

"No! Smile at him, no matter what!"

She was looking straight at him, something about her eyes reminded him she wasn't a kid, but a woman born in the Middle East a long time ago. How long? Even Baba Yaga didn't know, but it was hundreds of years ago. Kurt had found her somewhere and being Kurt, he'd failed to record anything about where and when he'd found the gifted child.

"You don't need to tell me." She said. "You have to live here after Fabio and I have left to go wherever Ruby sends us. We won't crap on your doorstep Spider. Anyway, a little mental persuasion, just might turn Billy into a gentleman."

She kissed him, a hard kiss that left a feeling of pressure on his lips, even after she'd stepped back.

"Now you'll know what you're missing." She said.

Spider's heart was pounding, as he followed her out to the hall to pick up the others. He held Mary's hand, hoping she couldn't smell Monique's perfume on him.

"No public transport or cars tonight." He said. "I booked a car to take us there and bring us home again."

It was going to be fun! He kept telling himself, over and over.

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The Hongŭi Line of the Korean State Railway had once terminated at Rajin port, but now carried on, hugging the coast for miles. Eventually it turned inland and headed for Pyongyang, but Ruby and her group would be getting off long before then. Rajin was a potential problem though. Lots of sidings they might end up in for days and plenty of train employees opening up freight cars.

"We're on a through train, but Kallina said we might still get stuck here for days." She said.

The plan was to leave the train and get on another, if their current one did look likely to be held up for a while. There were no passengers and boxes of freight tended not to moan about delays. Moving trains was dangerous, they had no paperwork or authorisation to travel.

“And we’ll lose the portaloos.” Commented Sarah.

That mattered quite a lot to all of them. Even gifted kids on a mission, needed to travel with a little dignity. Rakwon and the East Sea Fleet Headquarters were still a long way off, a good three hundred kilometres the way the train line snaked about. Having a serious hold up so early in their journey was a depressing thought.

“We’re pulling off the mainline.” Said Sophie.

It was frustrating, feeling the train rattling over points, but having no idea where they were going. It was approaching dusk outside, spoiling the view through numerous holes and gaps in the sides of the carriage.

“We’re on a siding.” Said Olga. “They’re not sending us into the port itself.”

“Probably just removing one freight car.” Said Lau. “And then we’ll be on our way again.”

“You’re probably right, but stay alert.” Said Ruby.

It did seem that one or more carriages were being removed from their train and perhaps some added. A loud diesel shunting engine arrived and there was a lot of shouting in Korean. Then a lot of metal hitting metal sounds and their carriage lurched forward.

“Crap ! It’s too dark to see a thing.” Said Olga, her eye at a gap in the wall.

It was frustrating, being at the centre of so much commotion, yet unable to see what was going on. Ruby felt for the minds outside, but they were too far away and thinking in a language she didn’t understand. It was Charlotte, concentrating hard and focusing on just one man, who gave them some answers.

“There are three carriages to be removed.” She said. “I can feel the man in charge of the sidings and he’s upset. Too few shunting engines and there are four carriages to add, all going through to Pyongyang.”

“How long do you think we’ll be here ?” Asked Ruby.

“Another two or three hours.”

Everyone let out an audible sigh. Two or three hours being shunted about would be hellish. None of them would be able to sleep and it would make everyone irritable.

“There’s something else.” Said Charlotte.

“There always is !” Said Ruby. “Come on, tell us the worst ?”

Charlotte was concentrating, it was obvious, even in the dark. No lights of course, the slightest hint of a light from inside their carriage would mean being discovered.

“All trains going on from here are searched.” Said Charlotte. “Just routine, two soldiers look into every carriage.”

“When ?”

“Not sure. I mean he isn’t sure. Probably just before the train leaves.”

Two soldiers weren’t much of a threat, but dealing with them might be noisy or messy. Guns were too noisy, but the methods used by the kids could be unpleasant.

“We knew searches were likely.” Said Ruby. “Try to rest and we’ll deal with these soldiers when they arrive.”

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Spider needn’t have worried; Billy genuinely did seem to want the evening to be a reward. Hired external catering of course, his pub had trouble serving a decent pie and chips. As if by magic, a

perfect three course fine dining experience had been delivered and served in the back room of Billy's club. There had even been a Vegan course, though Billy seemed to think that meant fish instead of meat.

"You did well Spider and I thought a little bonus was in order."

An envelope was given to him by one of Billy's minders. His people were good; you'd barely know they were there, unless they were needed. It was his second envelope full of cash that month and would help keep his money tin full. Spider opened the envelope and found a thick bundle of twenty pound notes inside.

"Thank you Billy, it's appreciated."

"You might recognise the banknotes." Said Billy. "It's the money you collected from Simon, that dodgy drug dealer. It never was about the money Spider, you know that."

Yes he knew. If the list of richest people in Britain included known criminals, Billy would probably in the top five. With Billy it was all about respect and keeping his patch clean of people like Simon. Spider put the envelope in his pocket. Later he'd split it with his team, they'd earned a cut.

"What do you think of the meal?" Billy asked.

"Wonderful." Answered Mary.

Everyone nodded and made appreciative noises. Spider wasn't into gourmet food, but he doubted if anyone in London was eating better than them that evening. A dessert trolley arrived, with a choice of half a dozen tempting offerings.

"Hmmm I could eat a portion of all of them." Said Fabio.

"Then do it!" Said Billy. "No point in wasting anything and it's all paid for."

Spider stuck to something with a long Italian name that tasted like Black Forest Gateau. The others tucked into everything, whooping with delight at each selection. Billy sat there like a much loved grandfather, hosting a meal for his family. Even the outside caterers began to loosen up, chatting to them a little between courses. It was a perfect dinner party, with no cooking or washing up involved.

"Brandy!" Yelled Billy. "Time for the brandy."

They were being driven home, there was no excuse for anyone to avoid yet more alcohol. The wine had been good, but the vintage brandy was exquisite. Spider felt himself mellow, as the yellow liquid touched the back of his throat.

"Billy, this is....." He said.

"Nectar of the Gods." Mary finished for him.

Billy gave them a slight bow, enjoying their appreciation of what he'd organised. Eventually the caterers removed everything apart from the brandy decanter and their glasses. Billy patted one of them on the shoulder and handed him a thick envelope. Billy might never get onto the Forbes rich list, but he lived well with his envelopes full of cash.

"To business." Said Billy. "I have quite a lot of collection work piling up Spider. Just your sort of thing, nothing too heavy. Things aren't picking up in the economy and you'd be surprised at who needs a bit of help with difficult debts. Not directly of course, but I know a couple of risk management companies, who pass work on to my organisation. No busted knee caps, no fractured skulls, just a little persuasion to pay up."

Billy had assigned the seating arrangements, putting the ladies to either side of him.

"A thorn between the blooms." He'd joked.

Spider was sat opposite him, weighing up the money he might make out of collecting cash for Billy, against the likelihood of screwing things up and having to move to a new city, maybe even a new country.

"I'm sure that must interest you?" Asked Billy. "It pays well!"

"Oh yes, I am. Thanks for thinking of me."

"Good! Now we're all friends, you can tell me why your helpers are so good at persuading people to pay up? Call it my natural curiosity, but I need to know?" Asked Billy.

Monique was fast, touching Billy's arm and giving him her Sunday best smile. Spider had seen Ruby do it so often and Charlotte. He could almost feel something in the air, like static electricity, though he might have imagined it. Billy's attitude changed, his face softening.

"No huge secret." She said. "We're just good at sweet talking people."

It was a non-answer, a pile of crap, yet the elderly gangster didn't seem to mind. He patted Monique's arm and seemed almost blissfully happy.

"Fine, just fine." He said. "More brandy, this is a celebration."

Their return car had been upgraded to a limo. Everyone in London knew Billy and they knew the address of his club. Spider settled back into a seat, far more comfortable than his lounge at home and he felt at peace with the world. A lot of it was the brandy, but he was determined to savour the moment.

"Whatever you did to him Monique. Thank you!"

"Will the effect last?" Asked Mary.

Monique and Fabio looked at each other for a good five seconds and seemed to come to silent consensus.

"Normally I wouldn't give details." Said Monique.

"But you guys are pretty cool." Added Fabio.

Could they communicate telepathically? Ruby always said they only felt general feelings, like seeing an enhanced aura. Spider wasn't sure though, there were times when they seemed to communicate without any words at all.

"Billy will be pleased to see us, all of us." Said Monique. "Being pleased will release tiny amounts of endorphins into his bloodstream. Not too much, just a very slight feeling of happiness. It should mean that we can work for him without worrying too much about his moods."

"And the effect is permanent." Said Fabio.

Had they ever put the whammy on him? Ruby claimed they wouldn't and Charlotte had confirmed that;

"You're family Spider, we'd never do that to you."

The brandy was still working, so he didn't really care one way or the other. If he was under their influence, he'd never know, so why worry?

"Thank you Monique, though I might get you to explain again when I'm sober."

"He'll think of us all as family." Said Fabio.

Crap! Now they were in trouble. Spider's experience with his family had been almost universally unpleasant, apart from his Aunt Queenie.

"Family!" He said. "That all depends on the family."

They were looking at him and Spider knew he'd been talking while drunk. He didn't do it often and only when in the company of people he trusted.

"My family were pretty bad." Said Mary. "There were some good times though. You must have some good memories Spider?"

"There is Aunt Queenie, but I was only twelve and she wasn't really family."

"People don't need to share your blood to be family." Said Monique.

"You must tell us now." Said Mary. "Or they'll just keep on, you know they will."

She was right of course.

“Aunt Queenie was a friend of my mother, not even sure what her real name was. People just called her Queenie and that meant I called her Aunt Queenie. All women of my mum’s age became unofficial aunts, it was the way people spoke then.”

“What was she like ?” Asked Monique.

“Fierce ! I was quite scared of her. She was always kind, but she never really meant anything to me, until I picked up the verruca from hell.”

“Oh those things are awful, I had three on one foot once.” Said Mary.

“What’s a verruca ?” Asked Monique.

Spider cringed at the thought of explaining. It would spoil the flow of his anecdote and to be honest, he had no idea what they were. Infection, bug, parasite ? He had no real idea, but luckily Fabio did know.

“A wart like growth, usually on the soles of the feet.” Said Fabio. “Actually caused by a virus and they can be painful and difficult to get rid of. The virus is also extremely infectious.”

“HmMMM and you had a nasty one ?” Asked Monique.

“Oh yes ! It meant I couldn’t go swimming and I loved swimming. I tried every stupid cure I heard of and my mum took me to the doctors at least a dozen times. Nothing shifted the damn thing !”

No interruptions now, just three faces watching him intently, always a sign on a good anecdote.

“I’d never thought of Aunt Queenie as particularly good at anything, she was just this woman my mum knew. One afternoon she heard about my verruca and offered to get rid of it for me. Being a bit scared of her I agreed and my mum seemed to trust her. I later found out that Queenie had watched a nurse cut out a verruca. Only once mind ! If I’d known that, I might have run for it.”

“She cut it out ?!” Aske Monique.

Open mouths now, three faces waiting to hear more.

“First she asked my mum if we had any spirits in the house and of course we had, lots of it. Queenie had me remove my shoes and socks and lie face down on my bed. Then she used some of mum’s vodka, spreading it over my foot with a new J cloth. When she thought my foot was clean enough, she asked my mum for a small sharp knife.”

“Oh shit ! You must have been terrified !” Said Mary.

“I was more scared of Aunt Queenie ! The thought of saying no or admitting I was scared..... No I was determined to let her do whatever she wanted to do. She used more vodka on the knife and then told me I had to keep still, even if it hurt.”

Mary was actually gripping his hand, comforting him for something that happened when he was twelve.

“She dug the knife in deep and it hurt, really hurt. She kept talking softly to me, trying to be soothing. I’d never heard Aunt Queenie being soothing before, she’d always seemed loud and abrasive. Eventually there was a pain so bad that I did yell out and again she was soothing, telling me it was done. She showed me a clump of bloody tissue on the J cloth, telling me it was the root of that awful verruca.”

“Wow, what then ?” Asked Fabio.

“More vodka over the wound, which stung like hell and then a large Elastoplast over the hole. It hurt to walk for a while, but I never had another verruca. I liked Aunt Queenie after that, began to care for her in my own way.”

They were looking at him oddly and he felt tired, he’d reached the sleepy stage of intoxication.

“That’s it !” He said. “End of story, you can applaud now.”

Mary was still squeezing his arm, a look of sadness in her eyes.

"That is your only happy memory of your family?" She asked.

"Crap!" Said Fabio.

"We've got better memories than that." Said Monique. "And we were brought up by Baba Yaga."

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For over two hours, their train was split apart and then rebuilt, the smell and sounds of diesel shunting engines filling their world. Sometimes there was shouting outside their freight car, but no one attempted to open the door. Once again, it was Charlotte who felt the furthest and saw the soldiers coming.

"Two soldiers, both well-armed." She said. "They'll be here in a few minutes."

Ruby had a choice, let Olga deal with them in her own highly violent way or the use the thirteen. Olga and her knife would leave two dead bodies in the train yard, almost guaranteed to mean them having to change trains, maybe hide in the countryside for days. Using the kids might save them all that trouble, or it might not.....

"I can take care of them both." Said Olga.

Murad was with her, both of them desperate to bring the fight to the North Koreans. It was the hours of being impotent, while being bombarded by the train yard noises. Ruby felt the urge herself, to regain control, of the situation.

"No, this is one for Charlotte and Eugenie to handle." Said Ruby. "Everyone needs to be alert though and ready to leave the train if we have to."

It was low density housing outside the train yard, Ruby remembered the maps. Some warehousing and a few areas of scrub. Not the ideal place to have to go to ground. They knew what to do, muttering at each other and forming a semi-circle around the freight car door. Sophie was their last resort, holding a gun in her tiny hands. The gun had a silencer, it was a gun taken off a North Korean in Budapest.

"Keep them alive if you can." Said Ruby. "Alive, happy and soon to forget all about us."

"We can do that." Said Charlotte, nodding at Eugenie.

There was the sound of laughter first, two soldiers exchanging jokes as they went through a boring routine. The door of the carriage next to theirs was opened and one of the soldiers went inside. They could hear him trampling about, shining a light into the corners. It wasn't very thorough, it didn't need to be. There are only so many places to hide in a freight car. The other soldier waited outside, rifle at the ready. The thirteen were silent and alert. It occurred to Ruby that the thirteen were twelve now, but she'd continue to think of them as the thirteen.

"Hurry up, the others will eat all the food."

The soldier waiting outside, obviously eager to get his share of supper. They moved on, walking the length of their carriage. Ruby picked up the tang of unwashed bodies as they reached their carriage door. Nothing overpowering, just a definite scent of unwashed male. Sophie aimed her gun and everyone remained still and silent.

"You're turn to search."

"Fine, at least I'll do it quickly."

The door rattles as the two soldiers fiddle with the various locks and handles. Eventually the door slides back and two astonished faces appear, lit by their own lamps.

"Don't be alarmed." Said Charlotte, in perfect Korean.

"We're nothing to be concerned about." Added Eugenie.

Ruby had her index finger pointed at the soldiers, ready to incinerate them if that was required. It wasn't the soldiers looked relaxed and happy to see them.

"Do I know you?" One asked.

"Yes, you know we're friends." Said Charlotte.

She leant towards the soldiers, whispering to them while gently rubbing her cheek against theirs.

One after the other, she won the complete trust of the men, making them hers. Ruby was good at it too, but Charlotte had mastered the technique.

"Lock the doors and forget all about us." Said Eugenie.

"Yes of course."

The door was relocked and bolted from the outside, hardly a problem if the thirteen needed to leave the train. They heard one of the soldiers leave a chalk mark on the door, they'd been inspected and found safe.

"Brilliant, wouldn't have believed it, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes." Said Murad. "How long will the effect last?"

"Years and years." Answered Charlotte. "Maybe all their lives. I'm getting better at it all the time."

Still in the dark, still not risking light being seen through the gaps in the walls. They waited for another hour before their train began to move. Backwards at first, across at least three sets of points. They knew they were back on the mainline when the ride became smoother and the train picked up speed. Ruby turned on a low powered battery lamp now they were moving again.

"We've a good hundred kilometres without any problems." She said. "As the railway hugs the coast. Try to get some sleep, if you can."

Ruby tried to sleep, but she could feel him in the distance, knew that he felt her too. Charlotte was looking at her, she felt him as well. The others might not feel him yet, but they soon would.

"Kwan." Muttered Charlotte.

Ruby just nodded at her. He knew they were coming, but she felt no ill will, no sign from his attitude that he was doing anything to stop them. It was confusing, yet Ruby took it as a good sign. She rested her head on a satchel full of 308 ammunition and went to sleep.

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