

An extract from 'Rio' for you to read

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Nobody really knew what had happened that day when Jennie and I beat up the two boys, so we escaped the inevitable inquisition that would have followed had our other friends found out about it. As for the boys themselves, they just grinned sheepishly at us. We stuck our noses in the air and ignored them - which suited them I suppose.

The interest in our kidnapping disappeared slowly over the next couple of weeks or so and I almost forgot all about it. Until one Friday afternoon.

"Rio, Saskia, for you," said Mum, waving the phone she'd got to a fraction of a second before me.

"Hi Saskia, where's the fire?"

"No fire. Got a problem though."

"You need my help, *again*?"

"Yes, well no, not really us. Five have asked if we can give them any more information on those terrorists who tried to blow you up. Six have been digging around and have found out stuff apparently connected."

"Six?"

"Sorry, MI6. They deal with stuff outside the country, Five, the lot we work for, stay inside the shores - more or less. Anyway, Ops have asked if we can go talk to them."

"I guess, provided we can fit it around school."

"We have to work as well you know."

"Yeah, sorry. Didn't think, don't mind me, might engage brain one of these days."

Saskia laughed, "Know what you mean. How about Sunday? Ops is 24/7."

"Ok. You can tell me all tomorrow. Er - how will we get there?"

"Not sure yet. Can't carry you all that way. Going to have a word with Voice. If it'll oblige, we go like that. Otherwise it might have to be the mini and take all day."

"Don't mind. Just let me know. Need to figure out what to tell Mum."

"Tell you tomorrow. Usual time?"

"Yeah. Bye, Saskia."

Hm. I figured I'd better put Mum on at least Yellow Alert. I could upgrade to Red later as required.

"Mum? Might be going out with the Saskias on Sunday. Dunnow where yet, nothing definite."

"Ok dear. No problem as long as homework gets done."

Typical Mum. Typical response. Still, all arranged, however tentatively at the moment. Then I forgot all about that, I had a date with Dan. Just a film - and a snog - but I was still looking forward to it.

Saturday was a fairly full day. I did pictures for Saskia's dad and for Eddie Simpson. In-between all the running around and jumping up and down, the Saskias had details.

"Ok. Voice is up for translating us directly. This time we'll try and stay on the right part of the timetrack. One Rio at once is quite enough thank you very much."

"Hey," I replied, "you got to gang up on me with six of you. Don't I get chance for my own back?"

"Wasn't six of us all at once," she thought for a moment. "Ok, there *were* four of us at the old hotel."

“What about your birthday party?” said Saskia Chandler. “There were four of us there as well.”

“Good Heavens. You’re right. I hadn’t thought of that before,” I said. “You must have got that Voice to send you round twice.”

“Mm. It agreed straight away. It must have a soft spot for you, Rio.”

“Does it do anything you ask it?”

“Pretty much. We try not to ask for personal stuff too often. Mind you, we do do it’s dirty work for it, so do you now. I think we’ve saved the world about four times so far.”

Saskia Chandler laughed. “For an omnipotent being, it has some pretty strict limits. It can’t intervene on its own. That’s why you had to decide what would happen to Jennie. You had to give a direct order. So basically it owes us some favours. But we’d rather not find out when the favours begin to run out.”

After the Saskias had left, I upgraded Mum to Red Alert.

“Out most of the day tomorrow Mum. Going to get homework sorted tonight just in case.”

“Ok dear. Not *too* late tomorrow.”

I gave her a hug and a kiss and escaped to my room to do aforementioned homework. I had to write a history essay, about the First World War. Now why couldn’t it have been about the Battle of Waterloo? I knew all about *that*. After all, I’d practically *been* there.

Sunday. The Saskias arrived around about ten o’clock. I wasn’t quite ready so Mum made them sit down and have some hot chocolate. They accepted at once. I think if the Saskias ever refuse hot chocolate, it’ll be because the world’s come to an end.

The three of us went out and piled into Saskia’s mini. We didn’t go very far, just to the shopping centre.

“Use to leave it in pub car parks,” grinned Saskia Hunt. “Until madam over there made the point that everybody knows who drives the white mini. We were going to get a terrible reputation as boozers.

“So now we leave it here. Got reputations as shopaholics instead,” laughed Saskia Chandler.

I laughed with them. They were quite right, everybody knew who drove the white mini, the Saskiamobile. Then we were apparently ready for a quick trip to London. I’d only ever been to London the once, with Dan to see Jonathan. I didn’t really see much of it then. Not that I was going to see much of it now. Just the outside of MI5. “Ready Rio? Voice says you don’t need to hold our hand anymore. It’s got your pattern or template or whatever. Don’t understand all that but it apparently does so that’s all right then.”

“Voice?” said Saskia Chandler. “To the street behind MI5 if you’d be so kind.”

Voice didn’t speak to us, we just - moved. We were standing in a narrow street with high buildings on all sides.

“Ah, good. Seems to be the right place. Let’s hope it’s the right time,” grinned Saskia Chandler. Then she noticed my worried look. “Don’t worry. Voice doesn’t make mistakes. We are where should be - and when we should be.”

Then I thought of a question. “Are you the Saskias or the twins? Surely the people here don’t know there are only two of you?”

Saskia Hunt laughed. “Perish the thought. No, there are four of us - as far as this lot are concerned anyway. We’re the Saskias today. Come on, round the front.”

The walk round to the front entrance took a few minutes, it's quite a big building. Inside, we were stopped for a security check.

"Hello, girls. Going up to Ops."

"Yep," said Saskia Hunt. "Got a new person for you. This is Rio Ashworth. Show him your badge, Rio."

The Saskia had made a point of reminding me to take the badge in its little leather folder with me. I handed it over. The guard looked at my picture, then at me, then he put the badge under a machine. It must have been something like a supermarket barcode reader, there was a spill of bright red laser light, then the machine went 'bing'. The badge was handed back.

"Seems you're who you say you are, Miss Ashworth." He looked at the Saskias. "Girls? If you'd be so kind?"

Both of them produced their badges. The guard didn't bother with the machine. When I raised my eyebrows at this, Saskia Chandler said, "Oh, he knows who we are. Standing orders are to look at all credentials, so that's what he has to do."

The security guard grinned at this. With badges handed back, we walked through the metal detector arch and up the stairs. The arch hadn't found anything, the Saskias had told me what to expect and I wasn't carrying anything, let alone any metal. I found myself wondering how 'normal' operatives got on, coming in with dirty great big guns and what-all else. Oh well, their problem.

To get into the Operations Room required us to pass through a locked glass door. We had to produce our badges again. I supposed the door was bullet-proof glass.

The room didn't look anything like it does on TV spy programs, understandable really, don't want people to know what it actually looks like, just in case. Besides, it looked distinctly unimpressive, just desks and normal computers. There were doors leading off it at intervals, some glass, some not. I could see that the ones with glass doors were just meeting rooms, and I supposed the doors I couldn't see through were just offices. And there wasn't a gun in sight. I 'said' as much to the Saskias.

"Despite what you've heard or seen, they don't go round shooting everything in sight. Ninety nine percent of the work they do is just organisation. You wouldn't go round blowing holes in paperwork or forms - no matter how much you hated filling them in."

I was still grinning at this when one of the non-see-through doors opened and a man came out to meet us.

"Hello girls. Good of you to come. I'm Gary Sinclair. You must be Rio."

He stuck out his hand so I shook it gently. "Pleased to meet you Gary."

"Rio is one of the two girls involved in the two bombing campaigns," said Saskia Chandler. "Her involvement with Five is something of a coincidence, but you might as well use that to your advantage."

He looked at me. "I'm told you were almost killed."

"Mm. Right down to the wire," I said. "Don't really want to do that again."

"I can imagine. Come and sit down." He led us into one of the meeting rooms. "My spies," he paused to grin at us - this was obviously an old joke around here - "tell me you girls like hot chocolate. We just happen to have some. Would you like a drink?"

Saskia Hunt looked at me. "This is obviously in your honour Rio. In all the years we've been coming here, neither we, or the twins, have ever been offered refreshments before. Things are looking up."

With drinks organised, Gary opened the proceedings. "Right, Rio. You foiled the original plot to bomb your shopping centre."

“Had a bit of help here and there but pretty much, yes.”

“Then the next step in the campaign was supposed to make an example of you?”

“Yep. That’s what it seemed to be.”

“Six have been busy - did Saskia tell you that? - and what they’ve found is that it’s all linked with that weapons plant that we sorted out back around Christmas. You were involved in that I think?”

“Yes. Although I didn’t know what it was until just now.”

“The plan was to use atomic weapons in the bombing campaign, as you can imagine, that would have been devastating. Thanks partly to you, that didn’t happen. It seems that now they can’t do one big bang, they plan a lot of smaller ones. Up to now, we’ve succeeded in stopping that. We rounded up a lot of the people involved after your kidnapping, but despite all the information Saskia sent us in the voice file, we know there are still some of them at large. I have to ask this, how did you find out about the original bomb, the one in the shopping centre?”

Now what should I do? Ask my friends first at least. *“Saskias? Should I tell him?”*

“Yes. We’ll tell him it’s secret. These guys are good at secret. It’ll be ok.”

“Ok. I don’t want this widely known but I’m a natural telepath. I can hear what people are thinking.” I held up my hand to stop him speaking. “No. I don’t read minds. I can’t tell you what you’re thinking right now,” then I grinned at him, “or perhaps I can, but I don’t need to read your mind to figure it out.”

He had the grace to laugh at that. “So how does it work? It must have helped in some way?”

“Actually we’ve discovered I don’t read minds at all. What I do is receive thoughts that people send. Usually they don’t know they’re doing it, it’s sort of as if they’re speaking their thoughts under their breath, if you see what I mean. That means it’s less useful than perhaps you were thinking. People have to send before I can receive.”

“Ah, so the original bomber was sending thoughts which you picked up?”

“Yes. He didn’t know he was doing it. Neither did the terrorist I ‘heard’ while we were locked up. That didn’t help, it was in Arabic or something like that. I only speak English - and Rubbish of course.”

More laughter, which is what I’d been trying for.

“So putting you in a car and driving you round London hoping you’ll pick something up is a bit of a non-starter then?”

“Fraid so. I’m not going to be much help.”

“Well, at least we know how the original bomber was caught. We didn’t really buy your explanation. What I do know is that if you ring us up and say you’ve heard another bomber, we’ll be sure to take you seriously.”

For a little while, more or less since we’d arrived, I’d been picking up low level thoughts. This happens quite often and I just ignore it. But suddenly I got one phrase clearly, *‘I wonder if they’re on to me?’* I thought I might know just what that might mean.

“Er, we might have a problem.”

“Problem, Rio?”

I related what I’d just ‘heard’. “Don’t look around or do anything different,” I said. “It has to be somebody quite close, probably in the big room outside.”

“Somebody working both sides,” Gary said. “We’ve investigated that possibility, everybody comes up clean. You sure about what you heard?”

“I heard what I said. What’re you going to do?”

Saskia Chandler spoke first. "Whoever it is, is obviously jittery. We could try and flush him out. Want us to have a go? They won't suspect us."

"We can only try. Well, let you try anyway. Go for it."

"Ok. Get ready for a chase."

The Saskias got up and walked out into the big room. I followed, along with Gary. Saskia Chandler looked around the room, then called out, "Yes. We're onto you."

I had an immediate sense of dread, I had to run - now. This I was fairly sure was coming from one of the Saskias. It was fairly low level. It wouldn't make *me* run, it was just a feeling. But it must have hit our double agent like a club. A man at one of the desks suddenly jumped up and ran for the door. He dived down the stairs with the Saskias and a couple of others in hot pursuit. I stayed put. The Saskias would catch him, I'd only be in the way. That turned out to be a big mistake.

I was looking around me, just being my usual nosy self, when one of the men still in the room said, "You're that girl, aren't you? The one who stopped the bombs?"

"Mm. That's me."

Suddenly he was holding a gun! I don't suppose it was all that big, but from where I was standing, looking down the wrong end of it, it looked like a cannon. The mouth of the barrel looked big enough for a train to come out of.

"You didn't think there was only one of us, did you? You did! Still, you'd have been onto me sooner or later, at least I can take *you* out."

And he pulled the trigger! The gun fired!