

Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

Chapter 24 - Norway

“Kallina had ended up in one of the vehicles being used by McGill’s marauders. A range rover lookalike built for the Russian military. The heater worked well and she’d had a nap for nearly half an hour. The two columns of energy had brought her back to being wide awake.”

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Einar Gunnarsson had consciously resigned from working for Gallaan, even though there was no way of letting anyone know. The other problem was that despite him not wanting to be part of the battle, the enemy didn’t realise that. All he wanted to do, was find Lena and get them both off the island. Away from Norway too, maybe the whole of Scandinavia.

There had been at least two rumours that Nick Teems had been killed. Both false, Gallaan’s head of security seemed to be indestructible. Wounded several times, Nick still came back, with one of the new energy weapons in his hands.

“No coming back this time, buddy.” Muttered Einar.

Einar found every dead creature to be encouraging. The energy weapons tended to turn them into a viscous mess, while leaving their weapons undamaged. Not pretty, but it meant not only that they could be killed, but every dead one, meant one less to fight. Not encouraging, was the unofficial kill ratio, he was keeping in his head. So far at least, there’d been three or four dead humans, for every dead creature. Finding what was left of Nick, was particularly disheartening. Einar didn’t call it in. No point really, no one had answered his comms for at least an hour. His side were all dead or dying. Not Lena though, he had to believe she was still out there somewhere, on that fucking island.

“Shit.....You should have stayed in Paris, Nick.” Einar muttered.

He shifted the bloody remains of Nick’s clothing, until it covered the ruined face. There wasn’t much else to do. If there ever was a backup plan, it probably hadn’t included removing the dead. As Einar knelt beside Nick’s body, one of them came through the trees.

“When will you guys understand ?” Einar yelled. “I resigned.....I’m no longer part of this war.”

The creature he’d been told about at the briefing, was a Rogue Das Geheimnis. It didn’t look too good. One of its arms looked badly burned and it had lost an eye during the fighting. It ignored his talk of not being involved any more, they always did. Despite looking very much the worse the wear, the rogue raised an energy weapon in its one good hand.

“Why is it so hard.....To get you people to leave me in peace.” Einar shouted.

Einar had an upgraded assault rifle, loaded with the latest deep penetration ammunition. Designed to deal with soldiers wearing state of the art body armour, the ammunition killed the rogues. Das whatever’s indeed, what a stupid damned name. Einar raised the assault rifle and fired a short burst into the head of the rogue. He always enjoyed seeing bits of their brain, coming out of the back of their heads. Not as spectacular as the new energy weapons, but the new ammunition killed them, just fine. The creature fell over backwards and Einar gave it a hefty kick between the legs. It might have been male, female, or not have anything between its legs. Even if it was smooth all the way round, nothing could avoid reacting to a good hard kick in the crotch.

“Yep, you’re.....Officially dead.” Said Einar.

One had made an odd sound, but Einar had put that down to post death reflexes. The creatures were weird in life, so they were probably just as weird in death. No more brooding over Nick, he

looked at the compass on his wrist and headed south. Most of the dead Gallaan soldiers were down that way, or so he'd heard. He hadn't looked at that part of the island though, it was still on his search list.

"Lena !" He shouted. "Lena !"

No answer, he really hadn't expected one. It was a large island with lots of trees and quite a few hills. The terrain blocked sounds, which was sometimes a mercy. At least the rain had stopped, though he still seemed to be constantly trudging through mud.

"I hate this place." He mumbled.

His goal was to look at every inch of the island and find Lena, or get killed by one of the rogues in the process. Not much of a mission plan, but it kept him putting one foot in front of the other.

"Lena !" He yelled.

There was a sound, that might have been a voice shouting a reply. No more yelling, it just attracted the rogue whatever's. Einar headed a little west of due south and tried not to think about the mud, the rogues and the dead bodies to his left. Bits of people this time, like the aftermath of an explosion. There had been lots of those, the rogues had some very powerful grenade type weapons. By the time Einar reached the bunker, there were a lot of bodies, too many to avoid thinking about. He had no intention of going into the bunker, not again. A breeding facility of some kind, it had been full of young creatures, some very young. The fighting had been hard in the bunker, but Einar had been with the lead team. No more young rogues would be coming out of the bunker.

"Oh, hell.....Where is she ?" He muttered.

Just past the bunker was a fortification left over from a previous war, probably the second world war. A pill box they were called, usually sentry positions with fixed position rapid firing machine guns. Once it would have brought terror to an advancing enemy. Now it was just a hole in the ground with a roof; somewhere to shelter for a while.

"Einar.....How did you find me ?" Asked Lena.

Daylight outside, though there was heavy cloud cover. Lena had found an area of shadow, behind what had once been a gun mount. He noticed it straight away, the bloody end to her black jeans. No boot on that leg either and Einar had a pretty good intelligence quotient.

"Just damned good luck.....Your foot.....Can you still walk ?" He asked.

"No, but I've managed to stop it bleeding." Said Lena. "Something bit it off. The twenty first century and I get something small and nasty, biting off my fucking foot.....I'm just hiding here until the Norwegian authorities arrive. They must be on their way by now."

Einar went into protective mode; it was his first instinct. The bandaging on where her foot had been wouldn't have won any prizes, but it was doing the job. No new bleeding by the look of it, though he was about to change that.

"We can't stay here Lena." He said. "Like the last time we left this island, we need to get over the bridge and head towards the airstrip at Skagen."

"Einar, you're a crazy man, I had two feet then. The creatures are dead and most of our operatives. Wait here, do it the easy way....For once."

Einar was certain that staying on the island meant dying. If it was just himself, he might have welcomed a death in battle. But Lena was there now and he had a need to make sure she reached safety.

"We had it too easy, their elite fighters are still underground, I know it. There were a lot of young fighters among them and quite a few who seemed to be just savage beasts." He said. "You must have noticed how easily some of them died. Trust me Lena, we haven't beaten them."

"I'll say it again for the hard of understanding.....I have no damned left foot." Lena shouted.

"We can strap up that leg and then you can use me as a crutch. It'll work, I've seen it done before. We won't win any races, but we can get to Skagen."

"You're sure?" Asked Lena.

"I am."

It took a while to strap her leg up, the one with no foot. Once they'd walked a few paces, it was actually quite easy to support her. Not fun through mud, or on some of the steep slopes, but if they tried to keep to decent, level ground; they might get to Skagen before nightfall.

"Are you alright?" He asked.

"Yes, no sharp pain, just a persistent throbbing. I'm beginning to think your idea might not be crap after all."

Einar usually liked to be proved right, but not this time. As they did a strange kind of three-legged walk past the bunker, the creatures came out. Lots of them, all heavily armed adults. He'd been right, the rogue army had been in hiding, probably deep below the breeding rooms. There had to be at least a hundred of them, with more appearing all the time.

"Brace yourself against me." Said Einar. "I've still got quite a few clips of the new ammo and I intend to use them."

"I always thought we'd come out of.....All this." Said Lena.

Einar rested his assault rifle across Lena's shoulder and aimed it at the approaching rogues. He didn't need that good an aim, there were so many of them. Einar fired the weapon on fully automatic, straight at the rogues.

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Tromsø was having a good weather day, with no precipitation and a temperature of one degree centigrade. There had been people waiting at the international airport, already inside the perimeter fence. Ruby must have organised them with someone, though Todd no longer assumed it had been a favour from Foxy. Ruby was a talented woman, with some gifted wunderkinds. Security services around the world had once tried to wipe them out. Now their services were valued and that had caused some quid pro quo with some very unlikely people. The extra hands were useful though, in removing their vehicles and equipment from the two Antonov aircraft. Their pilot was pulling his jacket as tight as it would go.

"The weather forecast might say one degree." He said. "The windchill must be about minus ten. Jeeez, this place is a long way north. The wind must be coming straight from the north pole."

"I just wish there was less cloud cover over the island." Said Alex. "The satellite images are fairly useless."

"I thought the new satellites could see in all weathers." Said the pilot.

"Nothing can penetrate heavy clouds, nothing." Said Todd.

Their APC had been the first vehicle into their Antonov, so it had been the last one out. State of the art, at the real bleeding edge of technology. You never quite know though, what being bumped about in a cargo plane, can do to technology. The APC was designed to be tough, to survive just about anything. It was still a huge relief, when its engine started and the systems came to life. Ruby came out of the APC with a grin on her face.

"We've a direct link to the trawler fleet." Said Ruby. "There'll be putting the attack team ashore in about two hours from now."

"I just wish the cloud cover would lift." Said Alex. "Anywhere else and it would be a storm front, but here.....It might simply hang about for days, right up to thirty thousand feet."

"It's probably not a natural phenomenon." Said Kallina.

Kallina had been fairly quiet for days, healing and resting for the big day. Todd had almost forgotten her violent episode with Max. It was strange though, to see her with Max, almost arm in arm with her old nemesis.

"Is that possible?" Asked the pilot. "Can a storm front of that size, be formed artificially?"

"It depends on your definition of artificial." Said Max.

"I could do it.....I have done it." Said Kallina. "I'm not arrogant enough to assume Ishel and her rogues, don't have skill at least equal mine....Maybe even better."

"Ishel with her own cloud of invisibility." Said Todd. "Now, that is a scary thought."

"Come on, we should be on the road by now." Said Ruby.

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McGill was aware of the sometimes-damaging effect of putting unscreened tech on cargo planes. Aircraft were static magnets, often flying through electrical storms. It was mercifully rare, but sometimes tech that had worked fine when loaded up, never worked again. His marauders had been given several vehicles, most of them made in Eastern Europe. The two four-wheel drive ranger rover clones, started up with no problem, as did the small command APC. Embarrassingly, it was a truck borrowed from Ruby's British contacts, that was refusing to start.

"We've tried all the obvious things." Said Johnson. "Fuel getting through, batteries seem fine, no clogged injectors. We either leave her behind, or move onto checking the harder stuff to fix."

Johnson was one of his marauders, a trained soldier. Everyone with him picked up a weapon and fought, it was number one on the unwritten list of rules. Johnson was also his mechanic, a highly skilled mechanic.

"Ruby's team are ready to leave." Said Rosie. "So are the Russians."

The last part he took personally. Leaving the truck behind was one thing, but they needed the equipment it was carrying. Borrowing another truck was an easy solution, but moving the equipment would cause a delay.

"Alright.....Start unloading the truck, we'll borrow one." Said McGill. "We're in an airport, an international airport. Someone must have a truck we can borrow."

"Todd will know someone." Said Rosie.

"Sophie will be able to get it start." Said Cooper. "The little one with the red hair. I've talked to her and she'll be able to fix it."

Cooper, AKA Coop, wasn't the youngest of the marauders. But he had a real nerdy kid thing going on. He tended to go local when they arrived anywhere, which was usually a good thing. Need to buy ammunition from tribesmen in the Kalahari? Coop was the guy who'd know the local language and the correct etiquette. McGill trusted Coop's judgement and to be honest, they were caught between a rock and a hard place.

"Alright Coop.....Tell Sophie we'd appreciate her assistance."

McGill could hear Rosie using her comms to say there'd be a short delay in getting on the road to Skagen. If only it hadn't been the truck with a NATO sticker on the rear doors. The Russians would bust his balls for weeks, maybe longer. Sophie arrived looking like a female version of Coop. Jeans, T shirt and comfortable looking grubby trainers.

"So.....The truck won't start huh?" She asked.

"Yep.....Anything you can do to fix it, would be appreciated." Said McGill.

The side cover was already open, exposing the engine to the world. Unless Sophie could fix the problem, there might well be a long delay. There could be no question of leaving behind the

equipment it carried. Living on a plane tended to mean only packing what was totally essential.

McGill watched, as the tiny girl with red hair, ran her hands over the engine.

“Easy-peasy, I just need to give it a bit of a jolt.” Said Sophie. “Nothing is for free; you will owe me a favour. Nothing specific, just a marker I can redeem at a later date.”

“Get the engine running and I’ll owe you something huge.” Said McGill. “And....I always pay my debts.”

Of course, Rosie had to pick up something on the comms, to spoil his day.

“Ruby wants a ball park figure.” Said Rosie. “How long a delay are we looking at?”

When Sophie said something needed a jolt, she meant it. A blue flash came out of her fingers and the huge engine throbbed into life. It was a wonderful magic trick and McGill felt more relieved than he liked to admit. He’d give Sophie anything she wanted, even Coop as her personal gofer, if she asked.

“She’s fine now.” Said Sophie. “There shouldn’t be any more problems.”

“Tell Ruby we’re ready to leave.” He told Rosie.

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After killing the Russian operative, Mara should have instantly left the house, preferably at a fast run. No one else had come to investigate the gunshot, but the others might return at any moment. She was making assumptions, always a dangerous thing to do. Assumption one, she was alone with the three Gallaan prisoners. Assumption two had the potential to really bite her on the backside, if she was wrong. The operatives would eat somewhere and then spend most of the night, burying bodies. Using the phone, she’d found while in the house, was another significant risk. Using it meant it could be traced and for all she knew, Gallaan might be trying to trace all the phones of their missing executives.

“It’s what I’d do.” She muttered at the man she’d just killed.

Then there were the prisoners. All three were trying to talk to her, once they’d realised, she was their enemy’s, enemy. Of course, the duct tape meant it was all a meaningless noise, but they were becoming quite agitated. The woman was the hardest to ignore, the one with blood in her tears. Mara decided to stay in the house, while she called in to report. Like a worried parent, she was informed that Villand had been in the office, all night.

“Are you alright ? Have you been hurt ?” He asked her.

“I’m fine.....I twisted my ankle a little in the dark. A bloody fishpond, but I’m fine.”

In theory cell phone calls are encrypted and safe. In reality, it was shouting across a crowded room. Most governments with a cybercrimes division of their military, could listen in to your supposedly safe call. Even a few large corporations had the ability, though none boasted about it. Mara began a short description of where she was and what she’d found. Her Russian Aunt owned the house and quite a few of her house guests appeared to be very sick, very sick indeed. Villand was old school, he understood what she was saying. He muttered a few questions back at her, but their conversation didn’t last long.

“Take pictures of everything, as many as you can.” Had been his way of ending the call.

Mara took pictures on the phone, of the prisoners, the pile of dead bodies and even some of the personal property piled up on the table. Before she left, Mara pointed the gun at the woman prisoner. Point blank range as they say in the movies, the end of the barrel barely an inch away from the woman’s forehead.

“I should leave you tied up.” She said. “Killing you makes even more sense; you have seen my face. Will you promise me something ? It will save your life.”

A lot of head nodding and a noise that sounded like yes. Mara ripped off the duct tape from the woman's face, causing her to cry out.

"Listen.....Listen to me." Said Mara.

"Alright....It hurt."

"There are phones on the table in the other room, maybe even your phone. When you go, take any of them that works. Leave here and call the police once you've put a good distance between yourselves and this place. I will cut you free and then you can release the others. I need time to get away though, will you give me at least half an hour before calling the police?"

"Of course I will, you've saved us from those...Pigs. I saw what they did, how they killed the others."

"Half an hour, promise me."

"I promise, I won't even untie the others until you've had time to get away."

Mara left, avoiding the fish pond on the way back. Her car was where she'd left it and unlike in the movies, it started first time. No police sirens as she headed back towards Rouen, so it looked like the girl was going to keep her promise.

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The commander of the Russian troops knew quite a lot about the island of Hadseløya. Waiting for the main party to arrive had given him time to read reports and examine charts. The landing craft were going to come ashore near the village of Melbu, though he didn't foresee casualties among the small local population. Most would assume they were being visited by Norwegian troops on some kind of exercise. Unless anyone decided to load up an old shot gun and attack them, they'd be left to get on with...Whatever the locals usually did. The foreshore looked reasonably flat, an ideal place to bring the landing craft onto dry land.

"Cold, but dry.....Perfect." Said Commander Nikitin. "We just need the clouds to go away, to make it a decent day."

"The main party will arrive at the agreed time." Said Hajna Kállay, his second in command.

At one time women in senior positions had been rarer than honest politicians. Then fast track promotions had arrived and his superiors realised that keen women volunteers, were worth a dozen male conscripts. Igor Nikitin had mixed feelings about women going into combat, though he kept such feelings to himself. Hajna reminded him of his daughter and he wouldn't have liked her to be on the front line.

"Through the village as quickly as possible." Said Nikitin. "Don't give the villagers time to react."

His amphibious landing craft wasn't the first ashore, but that was because of official policy. Given his own way, Nikitin would have arrived at the front, with HiFi speakers belting out the Ride of the Valkyries. He wasn't keen on the Americans, but they knew how to make war movies.

"Everyone in our group is ashore." Said Hajna. "The second group at Sporviksanden beach.....They're moaning about the mud. But they're all ashore without incident."

"Everyone hates mud, Hajna." Said Nikitin.

Nikitin's half dozen landing craft headed west along the coast road, while the second group would head east. With luck, by the time a local villager had noticed them, they'd be gone. The main worry was the weather, specifically the storm front that might turn nasty. The thick cloud looked to be going nowhere and that meant little, if any, satellite imaging to help them. Their aim was to arrive at two 'interesting locations,' at about the same time as the other group arriving from the north. He could hear Hajna on the comms link. He was used to her tones of voice and body language. Something was making her anxious.

“There’s an electrical storm over the centre of the island.” She said. “It’s likely to become a major storm.”

“That doesn’t change our plans.” Said Nikitin. “Make sure the second group understands that.”

The two places of interest were strange thermal anomalies, seen by a low orbit military satellite. Add on the kind of electromagnetic activity usually associated with high technology and; the two locations were very interesting. The intelligence people were sure they were bunkers, facilities deep underground. There had to be a suspicion that the facilities weren’t a benefit to the human race. Nikitin’s orders were to take a look and destroy anything nasty, with an emphasis on the destroy. When it hit them, there was no real idea what had hit their vehicle. There was an electrical crackle and the amphibious vehicle rocked slightly from side to side. Luckily the local roads were in a condition that didn’t encourage speeding, or they might have been in trouble. As Nikitin touched the wall of the vehicle, he felt a slight tingle in his fingers.

“Stop.....Bring everyone to a halt.” He said.

He sometimes did it, though he knew it annoyed her. He looked over Hajna’s shoulder, to get a look at her screen. There wasn’t much, whatever satellite link they’d had, was dead. There wasn’t even the small blip to show where the second group were heading east. As for the main force coming in from the mainland.....There was nothing on the screen at all. The screen was mainly showing two bright blue markers, over the two places of ‘interest.’

“Crap.....What the hell happened ?” Said Hajna.

“You’re the expert.....You’re supposed to tell me.” He said. “Are we still mobile.....Is our vehicle still operational ?”

Hajna was good, just three key presses and one quick look at her screen.

“Yes, we are. Some kind of electrical pulse hit us, but we’re alright. Everything that matters, still works.”

“Good.....We rely on tech too much these days.” Said Nikitin. “Come on, we’re going to take a look outside. We’re going to stand on the roof of our vehicle. I wouldn’t mind betting, we’ll see something.”

“It might not be safe, Sir.” Said Hajna.

“Come on, you’re coming up the ladder with me.”

His troops were the best, not a conscript or ex-convict among them. Some had come out of their vehicles and taken up defensive positions along the road. Nikitin had never taken to a desk job, always asking to be at the front line, wherever that might be. He was fit, a lot fitter than most senior officers he knew. He clambered up the ladder and stood on the roof of their landing craft, Hajna stood next to him. She was using binoculars, but there wasn’t a real need for them.

“Wow, they’re going right up into the storm clouds.” Said Hajna.

“We were told to expect unusual happenings.....I think we can call this unusual.”

Two columns of blue electrical energy, rising up from the ground and into the thick cloud cover. It was the kind of interesting phenomena they’d come to investigate. They were marked out as their targets, as if there was a huge arrow in the sky.

“Can we contact anyone at all ?” He asked.

“I’d have to say no, unless this electrical storm settles down.” Said Hajna. “Not that I think it is a storm, but I..... Don’t know what to call it.”

The terrain didn’t look too bad, lots of small trees, which they could simply knock flat. A few small hills and of course there’d be the curse of modern warfare, streams and mud, lots of mud. On the whole he’d seen far worse.

“We’re heading north, going offroad.” He said. “When the terrain slows us down, we’ll leave the vehicles and walk. We’ll go to the first interesting location, the closest.”

“The vehicles might not take us that far.” Said Hajna.

“Then we’ve a bit of a walk.....It’s a small island. I’d say the closest electrical column is no more than two kilometres away. Give the order Hajna, get the men kitted up and ready for a walk.”

As he watched, the columns of energy began to pulse, as though something was either pulling energy from the storm, or feeding energy into it.

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Kallina had ended up in one of the vehicles being used by McGill’s marauders. A range rover lookalike built for the Russian military. The heater worked well and she’d had a nap for nearly half an hour. The two columns of energy had brought her back to being wide awake. Ishel of course and those of her rogues with the ability. It was the kind of thing Kallina would have done. Let herself become Baba Yaga, before building up a massive reserve of power. It’d be up there, close to where the atmosphere ended and space began. A rotating nexus of energy, slowly building and rotating. If it wasn’t for the dark clouds, she’d have been able to see it, as a glow, high in the sky.

“Can we contact Ruby ?” She asked.

“Not since those things appeared.” Said Rosie. “Too much interference, sounds like really bad static on a telephone line.”

That was the thing about large amounts of stored power. No one owned it, there was no lock on it, no password to stop it being used by anyone with the ability to do so. Kallina was drawing down from the store, a slow steady stream. Like an invisible umbilical cord, she was connected to the nexus, drawing its energy into herself. A small, tiny percentage of the total rotating at the edge of space, but a huge amount to her. More than the power of the two nuclear weapons dropped in World War Two, combined. There was a side effect though, Kallina was changing, becoming Baba Yaga. Rosie could see it; she was beginning to look scared.

“I won’t hurt you.....I would never hurt you.” Said Kallina.

There were other marauders in the vehicle, all well-armed. Kallina didn’t want to risk a fight where all of them were almost certain to die. She’d seen something though, what was waiting near the road at Skagen bridge.

‘Ruby, can you hear me ?’ She projected with her mind.

‘Stop shouting, that hurt.....’ Replied Ruby.

No good, she was changing and had enough stored power to destroy a small town. There was no stopping the change now and the marauders were beginning to look decidedly hostile.

‘I’m coming to you.’ She broadcast.

The change happened mid change of location, which was a first. She left the marauders vehicle as about fifty percent of her still Kallina. She arrived inside Ruby’s APC as Baba Yaga on steroids. There were actually electrical sparks coming out of her fingers. Max may have saved a few lives, good old Max, who’d she’d attempted to kill on many occasions. She had to look fairly terrifying and Ruby’s new Russian friends had never seen her as Baba Yaga.

“It’s alright, she’s a friend, one of us.” Yelled Max. “It’s Kallina really....A friend.”

Perhaps not totally convinced, she was picking up a lot of fear. Alex looked particularly nervous of her. If she’d yelled at him, he’d have probably soiled his boxer shorts. As she approached, he pushed himself into a corner. An educated new era Russian, but he’d have been brought up with tales of Baba Yaga. She was deathless. God didn’t want her. The Devil was scared of her.

Long lived and fairly indestructible would have been good, but deathless.....That was quite sad and terrifying, when she thought about it.

"Every child born of woman, must die." She muttered.

Alex actually whimpered, as he tried to take up as little space as possible. Baba Yaga ignored him and looked for Ruby. She found her sitting at the front, next to the driver. Ideally, Kallina would have become herself again, but the power in the sky was making that impossible. She could feel the rogues now and they were close, too close.

"We need to stop, they're waiting at Skagen." Said Baba Yaga. "When we try to cross the bridge to the island, the rogues are certain to attack."

Ruby nodded at the driver, who brought the APC to a halt. The others were in vehicles behind them, strung out with deliberate gaps in the convoy. A surprise attack was unlikely, but the wunderkinds weren't guaranteed to spot roadside IEDs. Baba Yaga was becoming more sensitive to such things as the energy inside her grew. She could feel the concern from everyone, from the Russian soldiers to McGill's marauders.

"How many rogues are waiting at Skagen?" Asked Ruby.

"No more than twenty."

Ruby closed her eyes and Baba Yaga could almost hear the words, as she told a few of the gifted ones, what was happening. Charlie probably and Sophie, perhaps even Abe now had the ability to hear Ruby's projected thoughts. Nari too of course, she was in one of their vehicles. With no comms, it was the only way to tell them what was going on. They would then tell everyone else.

"Come on, we're going to do this on foot." Said Ruby. "Sophie can get a chance to use her rocket launcher and the marauders will get to see what we're capable of."

"And the Russian spetsnaz." Said Baba Yaga.

"They know, they had satellites watching Charlotte in Beibu Gulf." Said Ruby.

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Max had one of those moments, as he put on body armour and prepared to go into battle. He loved Monique and wanted her to be safe, but his real worry was for the boys. Damu and Enki were with strangers in Aden. Strangers who'd gradually feel like parents to them. His sons were young, every day would feel like a lifetime to them. They were his future, his legacy in many ways. Max Krause closed his eyes and swore an oath to any deity who might be listening. He promised to build a home somewhere safer than Mogadishu and bring the boys up properly.

"They need an education, a proper education." He muttered.

"I could help with giving them a fully rounded education." Said Baba Yaga.

For such a fearsome looking creature, the witch had a knack for moving unseen and unheard. There she was, watching him, while hovering a good six inches off the ground.

"Did you hear all my thoughts?" Max asked.

"Yes.....Sorry, I can no longer control what I hear. The power in the sky above us, the proximity of so many rogues. It all triggers gifts I can no longer turn off."

"You're forgiven." He said. "I'm human, but I can feel my skin tingling."

"Seriously, Max." Said Baba Yaga. "Send your boys to Oxbridge, or some American Ivy League college. First though, let me have them for a year, a gap year maybe. I'll teach them skills that will serve them well for a lifetime."

At one time he'd have laughed, but in reality....A year being taught by the wild witch of the woods, was probably more value to his sons, than an MBA from Stamford. He looked at her, knowing her offer was sincere.

“Yes.....Thank you.” He said. “I’ll send them to you when they seem old enough.”

Max finished getting kitted up. Officially they were to go into battle with Alex and his spetsnaz. Neither of them were exactly team players. When Baba Yaga began to head towards Skagen, he followed her.

“Slow down.....Not all of us can hover.” He said.

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