

Ruby 3

Chapter 26 – Strange House Guest

“Can you think of a single morning since puberty, when you haven’t woken up feeling pissed off at someone Sarah ? We’re all going to watch one another.... You’ll be fine.”

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Monique Ostby didn’t care who their rescuers were or who they were working for. They were taking them to Aden and that meant a city she’d heard of. A proper city, one with an international airport. She remembered the airport being bombed a few years ago, but she was certain it was working again. The man talking to Max had mentioned the airport looking like a UN feeding centre, because of all the international aid arriving. International aid in that quantity needed a decent airport. Max had trouble finding a way through the soldiers to get back to her. One of their rescuer’s helicopters was a burning wreck near their old prison, so everyone was crammed into the remaining two. Even the dead, who were stacked neatly to one side, each in their own body bag.

“It appears the volume of aid going into Aden will work in our favour.” Said Max. “No one has time to look too closely at the freight being taken in and out through the docks.”

Docks alarmed her a little. Docks tended to mean grubby freighters with poorly trained crews. Docks shouted weeks onboard those grubby freighters, rather than a few hours on a comfortable jet aircraft.

“We’re not flying out of Aden then ?” She asked.

“No, it appears we’ll be meeting the people who arranged our rescue, at the docks. They have something for me it appears. Our friend here even used the term about hearing something to my advantage. All very mysterious, he still won’t give me any names, including his own.”

A wounded soldier moaned and turned towards her. Monique smiled and briefly touched his arm. Max seemed to have come alive during the flight, but it wasn’t a situation she particularly enjoyed. Not that her life had been totally shielded from the reality of her father’s career in the French security service. One night he’d brought a wounded Moroccan man home, who seemed to have been shot. Her sister and her were sent to bed early, but Monique had crept downstairs in the early hours of the morning and peeked through the gap in the door. The man was sat on their much loved family sofa, which was now red with his blood.

She found out years later that the man had died the next morning. His body had been quietly removed the next day and their sofa had been replaced with a hideous orange leather one, which everyone hated. As for her sister ? She’d spent the night crying into her pillow.

“Can we trust this man with no name ?” She asked Max.

“I trust no one completely, but he’s been paid to deliver us to the docks in Aden. After that.....I think we have to think of whatever happens, as being better than spending years in Kallina’s prison.”

“You’re probably right.” She said.

There was a sound, as if someone was hitting the floor of the helicopter with a heavy hammer. Monique had to grab of the back of her seat, as their helicopter banked over to the right.

“Someone’s firing at us.” Said the wounded soldier. “Don’t worry, the floor is armoured and Lucas will teach them a lesson.”

Lucas might have been their leader, or the man using the heavy machine gun, which came to life as they banked.

“They’ll be sorry they fucked with us.” Said the man.

Monique couldn’t see the machine gun, it was at the front of the helicopter. She could hear it though, as it rained down death on those who had attacked them. They probably weren’t enemies, just tribespeople assuming every gunship was an enemy. Most of them probably died, without either side identifying who was shooting at who. Monique assumed they’d won the brief battle, as the machine gun stopped firing. A slight bank over to the left and they were heading for Aden once again.

“They had to do that, that sort of thing can’t be ignored.” Said Max. “The next flight over that area might have been a civilian flight without an armoured floor.”

“Strangers killing strangers, without knowing why. My father hated that kind of warfare Max.”

“So do I Monique, so do I. It’s a pity I never met your father, I think we’d have been friends.”

“Yes, I’m sure you would.”

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Eugenie had just finished breakfast in her room, on a cold and cloudy morning in Paris. She pulled a chair over to the window and watched the street for a while. Not that she was looking for any particular reason, that was part of the appeal. No threats that she knew of were likely to walk past. She could simply watch as the city came to life. Only one slight feeling of guilt, managed to spoil a tranquil morning.

“I should be with Ruby.” She muttered.

A tranquil mind can quickly become a bored mind. Eugenie didn’t drop into a full blown nap, just a sort of waking dream. First to arrive in her mind was an image of Gérard Villand. Not as she’d last seen him, but as a spider in the centre of a web. The body of a huge grey spider, with the wrinkled face of Villand. As that image faded she saw Ruby in Africa and she seemed to be involved in a terrible battle.

“I should have been there.....”

At first it looked as though everyone was fighting everyone, until she dropped further into the dream. Ruby and the thirteen were fighting a large group of Das Geheimnis. Ancient Das Geheimnis, who looked larger and stronger than Ishel and her people. Where was Ishel ? As with all dreams, what she saw was just about impossible to control. Ruby was using her gifts to crush two of the enemy creatures, while.....Charlie, yes Charlie was there as a being born more of flames than flesh and blood. Eugenie recognised her though, despite her appearance. She was doing such dreadful things to their enemies....Flesh becoming ash with just a touch.

“Something isn’t right.....They’re behaving like crazy people.” She muttered.

Rory came into view and he was firing at Ishel. Nothing was making sense and then she saw poor Fabio and he was covered in white hot flames. The image brought her awake with a jerk. Eugenie tried to stand, but her legs were trembling. The dream of Fabio being engulfed by fire had been so real.....

“I should have been there.....”

It was all nonsense of course, all a dream. Nothing but an illusion, just like the image of Villand as a huge grey spider. It took her a while to feel composed enough to leave her room though. It had all felt so real.

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Sarah Simmons had almost excused herself from active duty, or whatever it was called in Ruby’s army of wunderkinds, soldiers and Ishel’s rogues. Ruby had given them a quick talk about the dangers of The Curse, the mindless rage that usually began with minor anger. Nazili had added a

few, mainly dreadful anecdotes about the horrors inflicted on his people, often by their own relatives. Sarah knew she could be a little neurotic, she had long ago stopped reading books about medical symptoms. Spider had once called her a hypochondriac, which had angered her, mainly because he'd probably been right. She'd even looked it up.....Which had been a huge mistake.

'Hypochondriac - a person who is abnormally anxious about their health.'

It had said in the old dictionary she'd used to look up words for her college essays. Of course she'd then become a hypochondriac about being a hypochondriac. It had all culminated in Ruby avoiding twenty of her phone calls and a weekend of sex with Spider. Hard sex, brutal sex, a damn good rogering. Sex with Spider always helped ease her stress better than a whole bottle of happy pills. Wondering if she was angry enough to use her gun on a friend, was beginning to make her feel quite stressed. She'd mentioned her concerns to Ruby.

"Can you think of a single morning since puberty, when you haven't woken up feeling pissed off at someone Sarah ? We're all going to watch one another.... You'll be fine."

There had been a little eye rolling and Spider had said pretty much the same thing, but a little more politely. In the end it was one of the Arbiters, Nazili who had helped the most.

"The mere fact that you're worried about being angry, shows you're not at serious risk from The Curse." He'd told her. "Those worst effected feel no self-doubt, no regrets."

So.... She was currently in the middle of a battle, where it was hard to tell who were the good guys, the people on her side. She'd seen Rory firing an assault rifle at Ishel and her rogue's. Did that mean they were now the enemy, or had Rory been taken over by The Curse ? Ishel's people had fought back with their mental gifts, using boulders and broken pieces of walls as weapons against the British soldiers. It was all too much for Sarah. She found a pathway between two fairly solid looking ruined buildings and crouched down for a while.

"No..... I'm not going to hide." She muttered.

Counting bullets left in her guns helped. A strange therapy, but counting rounds was grounding and stopped her thinking about the madness going on around her. She had one Glock 32 in her right hand and another pushed down the back of her belt. Oh, how Serge would have told her off about that. Two lots of fourteen rounds and she'd fired her gun five times. Not that she knew if she'd hit anyone. She was working on the assumption that the creatures the Arbiters called their congregation were all enemies. She'd fired at three of them, but they were either very tough, or she'd missed. None of her shots had resulted in a body on the ground.

"Fuck." She said.

One of the Arbiter's congregation, the first she'd seen close up. A female, a very dead female. It looked as though a wild creature had ripped her apart, though Sarah knew all the wunderkinds were capable of inflicting such wounds. No burning though, so the female was unlikely to have been killed by Charlie. Skull cracked open, bits of brain were turning the pathway red. Torso ripped open from chest to crotch, the viscera thrown to one side like glistening, bloody litter. Sarah forced herself to look at every detail and cope with it. It was a desensitisation therapy of her own devising and strangely enough, it worked.

"Stop.....Stop there, don't come any closer." She shouted.

Another member of the Arbiter's congregation, a male and very much alive. He'd been through something, his right shoulder was bloody and he was limping. Add on the deep cut across his left cheek and he probably wasn't in the mood to stop for anyone. His right arm went back, as if he was about to throw something at her.

"I mean it.....Stand still or I'll shoot." Sarah yelled.

He was never going to obey, she just felt the need to try. As his arm came forward, she fired three times, aiming at the centre of his face. Much to her relief, the creature fell over backwards like a felled tree. They were tough but not too tough to be killed by her handgun. Sarah let out a sigh of relief, though she still kept her gun aimed at her dead adversary. Just to be sure, she fired three more bullets into his chest.

“Sorry.” She muttered.

Fuck, she’d lost track of her round count, so she put a fresh clip of fourteen rounds into her gun. Luckily Anna came running up in the few seconds when her gun wasn’t working, or there could have been a nasty accident. Anna was sweating and puffing a bit. Still armed with a high powered hunting rifle, the sight of the dead member of the congregation seemed to upset her.

“Crap Sarah, I’ve been chasing him for over half a mile.... Winged the bastard twice. How did you kill him ?”

Sarah waved her small Glock 32 about, with its pink grip. She wasn’t sure if Anna looked surprised or incredulous.

“Well done, but he should have been mine.” Said Anna. “You’re well away from the action here. Ruby is a good mile over that way.”

Anna pointed, but for some reason ran in a completely different direction. Sarah wasn’t proud of herself for doing it, but she used her phone to take a few pictures of the brute she’d just killed.

“Has to weigh well over three hundred pounds.” She muttered.

When she heard several explosions in the direction Anna had given her, she decided it was time to find Ruby and the others. Not quite a jog, though she was covering the ground fairly quickly. She came across Rory, as he was lying on the ground, obviously badly injured. No one else was with him, though Heranza wasn’t standing that far away.

“Kill her Sarah, get her.....She’s one of them.” Shouted Rory.

She knew Rory quite well, he was on her side, she was certain of it. As for Heranza ? She was stood next to two bodies, one of which looked like Graham the tech guy. Difficult to be certain, as half his face had been burned away, but evidence enough for Sarah. She aimed her gun at Arbiter Heranza.

“Keep still.” She shouted. “I will kill you Heranza, you need to know that.”

“You were lied to Sarah.” Said Heranza. “The hand of God has never betrayed us, it was Nazili who corrupted the faithful.”

“Don’t listen to her.” Yelled Rory.

His legs looked torn apart, he had to be in great pain. He still held an assault rifle though and Rory seemed determined to use it. He rolled on his side, while bringing the weapon round to aim it at Arbiter Heranza.

“Shoot him Sarah..... Rory has gone mad.” Shouted Heranza.

Sarah kept her gun aimed at Heranza, who seemed to be ignoring her. Two hand gestures from Heranza, both too quick to follow. Rory was up off the ground, held about five feet up in the air and he was screaming. Sarah heard the dreadful noise of snapping bones, despite the screaming. Rory was scrunched up into a ball, bones snapping, bending and cracking during the process. Mercifully, he probably wasn’t alive for most of it. After no more than a minute, maybe two, his body was just a bloody ball of bone and tissue on the ground.

“Bitch.” Yelled Sarah.

No hesitation, Sarah fired twice at Heranza’s head, before emptying her gun into the Arbiter’s chest and abdomen. When her gun was empty, Sarah brought out her spare and fire twice more into Heranza’s head.

“She’s dead Sarah”

Sarah hadn’t seen Ruby walking up behind her. Sophie was there too, and Todd with an assault rifle in his hands. Charlotte, as the creature of flames and burning was a few yards away. Suddenly Sarah felt a lot less scared than she had for a while.

“Ruby.....I couldn’t tell which of them had been infected by The Curse.” Said Sarah.

“Both of them were Sarah, you didn’t kill the wrong one. Rory tried to kill Ishel, though she escaped with a few minor wounds. Heranza did manage to kill Fabio, I saw it happen. She turned him into a pile of ash, right in front of me.”

“Oh.... Not Fabio.”

Sarah hugged Ruby and knew that things were going to be alright. After all, they always had been in the past. Tlal joined them, though there was still no sign of the wounded Ishel.

“Come on Sarah, stay close to me.” Said Ruby. “We’re heading for the tower now and I think Kallina might be a problem.”

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Spider hated being stuck in bed. The nurses were nice, one had even turned a blind eye to Doc smuggling in a pack of beer. After a day Doc had realised a significant number of his four wheel drive vehicles had effectively been left in an abandoned mining camp in Uganda. After Doc had left, he’d been left with the local TV station for company, and visits from nurses and doctors. They meant well and Spider had been in similar situations before. Once in a part of the world he wanted to forget, a roadside bomb had landed him in hospital for weeks and he’d been one of the lucky ones.

“In the army, wounds that don’t hurt too much, but get you a comfy hospital bed aren’t something to moan about. Decent food and no carrying a heavy pack for miles.....”

He’d told one of the nurses who seemed happy to listen to him ramble a bit. Actually he knew he was rambling quite a bit and knew it was the painkillers they had him on. He seemed to remember proposing marriage to a young nurse called Masiko in the early hours of the morning. She’d laughed at him of course, but only after kissing him on the cheek.

“You’re a very brave man.” She’d told him.

He hadn’t been though, not really. Sarah had needed to pee and going on her own has been a silly idea. He’d anticipated having to scare off the local wildlife maybe, but a Nagala! After being grabbed by the brute the rest had just happened to him. He barely remembered being carried in the creature’s jaws like a rag doll, and as for shooting it. There was that weird feeling that someone else had used his gun until the magazine was empty. He’d felt the same removal from reality before, in the part of Asia he still hated seeing mentioned on the TV news.

“It’s late Spider, I’m turning the TV off.” Said Masiko. “You need to sleep.”

“I hadn’t even realised it was still on.”

Alone with just the glow of a low wattage bulb near the door, his mind still refused to shut down. He fell into a weird state where his mind turned a mark on the wall into a face. The face became that of a woman he recognised and missed. Sarah, his Sarah, was walking between the ruined walls of an abandoned city. Being a dream he could see her face clearly, but everything around her was fuzzy and indistinct. She was looking at something, a body on the ground.

“Stop.....Stop there, don’t come any closer.”

He could hear her shouting, as some sort of brute on two legs walked towards her. There was more shouting he couldn’t quite make out, before Sarah firing a gun made him wake up. He was almost surprised to find himself alone and still in the hospital bed.

“Damn dream..... Felt so real.” He muttered.

It had to be the drugs they had him on, he'd never had vivid dreams like that before. Sleep evaded Spider yet again, as he stared at the ceiling for what felt like hours. His eyes found a spot on the ceiling, a spot that grew arms as he watched. Arms with hands that were pointing. A head seemed to pop up from nowhere and a face he recognised. The strange thing was, he knew he was dreaming before the ruined city filled his dreamscape again. The spot had become Ruby and she had a few of the others with her.

"Come on Sarah, stay close to me." Said Ruby. "We're heading for the tower now and I think Kallina might be a problem."

He watched them walk away, followed by Charlie and Sophie. Sweet tiny Sophie, he missed her too. If it hadn't been for her, he might well have still been in a prison in Tallinn. They all seemed to be walking towards an area of the ruined city, which was full of flames. He wanted to tell them to stop, to turn around, to run away. Instead he fell into a deep, dream free sleep.

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"I've done what I can to help you." Said Nazili. "The rest is up to you."

Ruby Anne Mason, twenty six years old and not totally human, blinked and had to concentrate to remember what was going on. They were stood near the base of the tower, surrounded by dead and wounded members of Nazili's congregation.

"I linked you briefly through dreams to those still in the outside world, to lessen the effect of The Curse." Said Nazili. "It will help....I hope it will help. I am drained though, you will need to fight your friend and destroy The Curse."

Ruby's mind was full of recent memories again. Most were of fighting alongside wunderkinds full of mindless rage. She'd felt the urge to destroy too. It was what The Curse wanted, it needed them to destroy each other and collapse the last enclave of the Ancient Das Geheimnis. It would then be free to take over the human world and the vision shown to her of a lifeless planet, would become a reality.

"Why Nazili?" She asked. "Destroying everything.....It doesn't make sense."

Nazili smiled at her and for a fairly alien looking face, he had a nice smile. She hoped he survived what she was about to do.

"Oh Ruby, you remind me of one of the faithful, moaning that life doesn't seem to make sense. My answer is always, why should it? Why The Curse seems to want to destroy us is a similar imponderable. After thousands of years, I've yet to hear a convincing explanation. We need to think simplistically..... It wants to destroy us, so you need to destroy it before it can."

She leant towards him, close enough to whisper. Ruby also blocked her mind to any who might be brave enough to try and scan her thoughts, her emotions.

"You really think I'm strong enough?"

"Yes Ruby, I do."

"Don't die Nazili.....I can't be the one to cause the end of your kind."

"If it is my time to die.....But I will try to stay alive Ruby Mason."

Poor Nazili, she now viewed him as she would an ageing grandparent, rather than an immensely powerful member of an ancient race. He still looked impressive though, even if he was a little singed by a few fire spells used by his congregation. The next problem to sort out was who to take with her, though the answer was simple. Stopping a huge argument about it was going to be the real trick.

"For once I'm leaving you behind Sarah." Said Ruby. "You're needed to protect Nazili. Protect him with your life he's likely to be the last surviving member of my ancestors."

"I will Ruby....Anyone tries to hurt him and I'll get really angry."

Typical of Sarah, a terrible joke at the most inappropriate moment. Ruby had to smile though and of course Sarah needed a quick hug. Charlie was moving towards her, she was the obvious choice to climb the tower with her.

"I'm taking Ishel with me..... Just Ishel." Said Ruby.

"But she's injured." Said Sophie. "Hurt far worse than she's admitting."

It was true, but Ishel had been hurt fighting off Rory, who'd been completely taken over by The Curse. She and her small group of rogues had then destroyed a determined small army of Nazili's congregation. Well.... All those Charlie hadn't turned into charred bones and ash.

"It has to be Ishel and I'm not debating it." She shouted.

Charlie glared and Sophie gave one of her sighs, even Todd was looking a bit dejected. Ruby had promised Ishel it would be just them at the end, whatever they might find. It had been Ishel's price for her help and a promise of peace for the future. Ruby had struck the deal in the hired Hummer, before any of them had heard about The Curse.

"Are you ready Ishel, queen of the rogues?" Asked Ruby.

"Yes, I'm ready."

Tlal wanted to argue, but one look from Ishel was enough to silence her. There were times when Ruby envied her ability to control her people. The problem was that such obedience tended to go hand in glove with fear and tyranny. Ruby was at the open tower door, before Nazili remembered something important.

"I nearly forgot.....Once you destroy The Curse, everything within the shroud will begin to disintegrate. There won't be a lot of time to reach the sacred stone."

"Wonderful..... More good news." Muttered Ishel.

Nazili had mentioned the number of sacred steps to reach the top of the sacred tower. It seemed that once a society had survived for a few thousand years, everything became a sacred something or other. Ruby had forgotten the number, but it had to be huge. She stopped about halfway up to catch her breath and Ishel didn't complain.

"We might have to kill Kallina." Said Ishel. "Are you sure you can do that?"

"I'll do it.... In fact it should be me. Her death should come from a friend who loved her, not an enemy."

"Do you see me as an enemy?"

"No but she will.... She'll see us both as enemies."

"Are you strong enough to beat her in a fight?"

The second time she'd been asked that in quite a short period of time. From somewhere deep inside came a certainty that she was strong enough. It was Kallina she had to fight though. Of all the people The Curse could have chosen as its champion, it had to choose Kallina.

"Yes." She said.

They arrived together at the top room in the tower, though the tower itself went up a further twenty feet or so, before being topped by a roof made of silver metal. The room was quite small, she'd been right to only bring Ishel. Pack her entire family of wunderkinds in there and their own tricks and gifts were likely to be a danger to everyone. The Curse, the strange grey rock was on a simple metal table in the centre of the room. Behind it, leaning against the far wall, was Kallina. She was hovering above the floor, in the form of Baba Yaga.

"I never thought it would ever come to this." Said Ruby. "You're like a mother to the thirteen."

Between them was the grey boulder, the stone that looked shattered, but in some way held together. The idea had sounded so simple, when the Arbiters had told her about it. Finish shattering

the stone and the evil it held would die, or at least it should die. No one in all their recorded history had ever managed to do it, but then again.....Ishel and her were probably the first to reach the top of the tower with hostile intent in their minds. Ruby could feel the stone trying to enter her mind. No, she would resist it, she was strong enough.

“We don’t have to fight.” Said Baba Yaga. “The Hand of God isn’t your enemy. It was them, the unfaithful Arbiters. They corrupted the true faith..... Think Ruby, wasn’t it them who gave you the way to pierce the shroud ?”

Kallina was right.... She might be right about so much else. Ruby saw Sophie hovering outside the window to the left of Baba Yaga. Just seeing her there focused her mind. Dear Sophie had disobeyed her, again and Ruby loved her for it. In her mind, Sophie was telling her something important.

“Leave here, let us do what must be done.” Said Ishel. “I have no wish to fight you.....As I told you once before, I think of you as my kin, my kind.... My family.”

Baba Yaga didn’t seem impressed with the statement of kinship with the leader of the rogues. She used a force wall spell of some kind, to throw Ishel back down the top few stairs and send her crashing again the wall. Now it was just them, with Sophie hovering outside, still trying to outline a plan that sounded far too simple to work.

“Join us Ruby, think what we could do..... We could rule entire worlds.” Said Baba Yaga.

Ruby was feeling tired, angry and worried about who else might have died to get her to the tower. Rory and Graham were out there on the ground of that strange world, both dead. Fabio she’d seen die, but what about Anna ? She hadn’t seen her since the battle had begun. Instead of avoiding her anger, she encouraged it, welcoming it into her mind like a much loved old friend.

“Have I ever told you Kallina..... How much you really.....I mean really, piss me off sometimes ?” She asked.

Baba Yaga looked confused, which was the ideal moment.

‘Do it Sophie.’

The wall behind Baba Yaga disintegrated, as Sophie detonated the explosives she’d probably stolen from the soldiers. The rubble became shrapnel, which hit Baba Yaga’s back. The ancient witch was tough, but the hundreds of bits of stone and mortar, had to have hurt her. Before her enemy could react, Ruby hit her with the biggest force wall she’d ever created.

“I’m so sorry Kallina.” She muttered.

Baba Yaga was already being crushed when she went backwards through the hole in the tower wall. Just before her friend fell from the tower, Ruby saw both her arms break, the bones snap as they protruded through the muscles. Mercifully Baba Yaga quickly fell from the tower, saving Ruby the horror of seeing anything else.

‘Sophie.....Sophie. Can you shield me ? This is going to be crude and simple.’

‘Yes... I’m a little drained from the battle though.’

‘That’s alright, I’ll put up with a few scratches.’

At least Ishel was alive, Ruby could see her moving, just a little.

“Get out.....Run.” Shouted Ruby. “I can do this....I know I can.”

In her head was a voice, The Curse had obviously picked her as its new hero, its new protector.

“Don’t do this Ruby, you know it’s wrong. The Arbiters were the corrupters.”

It might have actually worked, if The Curse hadn’t chosen to pull Serge’s voice from her memory.

True, he was the one person she’d probably loved the most. The way he’d died though, the pure stupidity of that pathetic school teacher. Once again Ruby relished her anger, owning it, using it. She put both her hands on the huge piece of rock which had been found in the cold depths of space.

“You picked the wrong voice.” She said.

Every bit of anger went into her hands, which aimed every bit of power she had left. The rock rattled a little as if teasing her, before it blew apart. Ruby felt it die, whatever evil thing it held. She also felt the pain from the bits of rubble Sophie hadn't quite shielded her from. No time to use the stairs, the tower was beginning to collapse. Ruby clambered over the rubble to the hole in the wall.

‘It's done Sophie.... Catch me as I fall.’

No answer, but Sophie was there..... Sophie would never let her down. Ruby passed out from pure exhaustion, as she fell from the disintegrating tower.

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Their two helicopters merged effortlessly into the stream of aircraft and vehicles coming and going from Aden, temporary capital of the Yemen, home to around eight hundred thousand people. Max Krause watched the seemingly endless convoys of trucks below and hoped they all contained food and supplies. Wars brought the jackals, especially long wars. There were always those looking to make a profit out of misery.

“Normally there are rules about where we could land...Normally. These aren't normal times and we'll be landing at the docks, a container depot.”

Max still didn't have a name for the leader of the mercenaries who'd rescued them. The man knew his business though and he seemed to know that part of the world and how things work. They had to fly out to sea to make an approach, before coming in over the docks.

“We're going to quickly drop you off.....I can see your welcoming party.”

“Thank you.” Said Monique. “I'm sorry you lost so many of your men while rescuing us.”

“So am I mam, so am I.”

Only their helicopter landed, the other kept a little out to sea. In less than a minute Max was watching the helicopters turn and fly north. Near a stack of containers were a group of people, a mix of men and women, all armed.

“Part of me wishes we were still on that helicopter.” Said Monique.

“No one is going to have gone to all that trouble and expense, just to kill us.” Said Max.

It sounded so convincing, but he really wasn't sure himself. He'd made so many enemies in his life, done so many dreadful things. There were probably quite a few who'd pay a small fortune for the pleasure of seeing him die, slowly. It was windy and dusty in the docks, plus the sun was glaring off the concrete. The tall blonde woman beckoning them to come to her looked familiar though.

“Come on..... We have to assume they're friendly.” He said.

“They want you for a job Max, it's obvious. Don't let them split us up.”

“I won't.”

“Promise me, give me your word.”

“I promise, no one is splitting us up. I've got used to having you around.”

Normally being taken into a container wasn't likely to be good news. It got them out of the wind though and the fine dust it was blowing into their eyes. There were a few crates with loosened tops in the container and someone he recognised.

“Olga.....If I'd been given a thousand guesses, I'd never have guessed you were behind getting us out of that hole in the ground.” He said.

“I am just an agent Max, a go-between if you like. You owe your freedom to George Polandrous, though the real hero is a brave young lady who works for British intelligence. She decided you might be able to make use of the contents of these crates. Better than them sitting in an MOD basement, gathering dust.”

Weapons tend to have a look about them, as though designers had agreed on a standard theme from the age of flintlocks. The cables and dials told him the weapon was an energy weapon. It was heavy too, though not likely to be too heavy once it was on a strap over the shoulder.

"I'm sure these are wonderfully lethal my dear Olga. What is it you expect me to do with them?"

"Careful Max, they hold a charge for months."

Foolhardy occasionally, but never a complete fool. Max carefully put the weapon down, while noting the photocopied set of instructions in the crate.

"Who do you want me to kill Olga?" He asked.

"Wherever you're taking him, I'm going too." Said Monique.

"We do come as a pair." Added Max.

"I don't want you to kill anyone Max, I'm just acting as an agent. There is a ship waiting to take you and the weapons to Mogadishu, where hired mercenaries have already rented a small compound. Mogadishu was my idea Max, it seemed the perfect place for you to operate from."

Despite telling him to be careful, Olga pushed one of the energy weapons to one side, so she could sit on the edge of the crate.

"Normally there would be a pile of cash for you too, but we know Monique is a wealthy lady, especially as she'd now a widow. Good luck explaining away the disappearance of Lionel Ostby by the way. No attempt to split you up.....And If you don't like Mogadishu, you can move."

"You still haven't told me.....Who the fuck do you want dead Olga?" Said Max.

"Have you been told the rogue Das Geheimnis have resurfaced?"

"Yes, Kallina mentioned it quite a few times." Said Max.

"Charlotte didn't seem to trust them." Added Monique.

"Those I'm acting for agree with Charlotte." Said Olga. "The problem is that Ruby made a deal with Ishel, the leader of the rogues. No hostilities now and in the future, in return for combining their forces now. And as I'm sure you know Max, once Ruby gives her word..."

"I get it..... Someone in British intelligence doesn't agree with a truce." Said Max.

"Not even asked, so they don't feel bound by it." Said Olga. "Look..... You're bound to go freelance, maybe a bit of minor piracy, it's been done before. Be careful though, the Americans won't turn a blind eye to it forever. You might even get involved in a bit of gun running. No one cares as long as your main effort is put into using the weapons on Ishel and her rogues. The energy weapons were designed to kill them, turning their flesh to mush.....Or so I'm told."

Max instantly had more respect for the heavy weapons with electrical wires coming out of them.

"Will they kill people?" He asked.

"Yes, but my client would prefer you not to do that. There could be blowback from that."

"Alright, I'm in.... And you have my word that my top priority will be finding and destroy the rogues." Said Max. "Not that I can talk for Monique."

"Of course I'm going with you."

Olga settled herself further onto the crate, they didn't seem to be finished.

"What did you think of the man who rescued you both?" Asked Olga. "Was he polite? Did he offer to help with your luggage? Would you recommend him to a friend? You know, all that kind of stuff."

"He was very good.....Very efficient." Said Monique.

"Bloody good, I'd work with him." Said Max.

"Well.....Make the slightest hostile move towards Ruby and the thirteen and he will be paid a truly obscene amount of money to kill you, both of you."

"I never intended to hurt them before." Said Max. "It was a misunderstanding with the British police."

"You killed a retired police officer Max.... But I accept you were probably doing the world a favour. I just needed to mention it... Part of my brief. I'll now introduce you to the captain of the ship you'll be on for the next week or so."

~ ~

~ **Hackney, London** ~

~ **Six weeks and two days later** ~

Ruby loved her flat in Hackney, she couldn't imagine living anywhere else, not for long. There was still a trace of the funky smell on the landing and food deliveries meant carrying everything up to the second floor. It was home though, in the emotional meaning of the word. A home bought by the Polandrous Foundation, who had then sold it to a real estate management company in the Turks and Caicos Islands. They had employed a realtor in Bermuda, who did all the paperwork for several retired Americans, from New York to Baton Rouge. All Ruby of course, every single one of those just about unbreakable false identities. All a way of remaining just a harmless PA in the eyes of the tax man. She quite liked the idea of owning property right across the globe and as George often told her. "You'll have to retire one day, everyone retires eventually."

Ruby never thought about retiring, she doubted if anyone under thirty ever did. If pushed and drunk enough.... Sarah had actually brought it up one night; Ruby thought she'd probably retire at around sixty, and get fed up with vegetating in front of daytime TV within a year.

"Then I'd find another George to work for..... Maybe a new Jurgis, a young one I can boss about." She'd told Sarah.

Ruby had come back with a few new scars and a wound on her neck that hadn't quite healed. It made her wince as she leant forward to look out of the kitchen window. Good old London, it looked like the rain was setting in for the entire day.

"I'm definitely a rainy London fan." She muttered.

Anna had shown up when they were back at the sacred stone, minus two fingers on her left hand. She still hadn't accounted for how she'd lost the fingers, simply saying.

"A can do without a wedding ring finger."

Spider was still recovering, or swinging the lead as Sarah called it. Anna had taken over much of Spider's shady empire of debt collections and delivering dubious substances. Anna and Sarah under the same roof for a large part of the day, Ruby kept waiting to see the murder in Ealing report on the news. Charlotte was in Paris with Pablo and Eugenie was there too. At least Charlotte had managed to have the meaning of life chat with Nazili, though it hadn't seemed to please her.

"He probably gave her his inspiring, life doesn't have to make sense anecdote." She muttered.

Ruby made coffee and cheese on toast for two, a regular thing now there was a new houseguest in her spare room. A strange house guest really, they were still rubbing the edges off one another. There were times when it felt like sharing a small flat with the Dalai Lama. She banged on the bedroom door, even though it was slightly ajar.

"Coffee and nibbles Nazili." She shouted.

"I'll be right out."

She'd done it again; leaving with thirteen and coming home with thirteen, ignoring the bit. Fabio had died, poor Fabio.....But they'd managed to rescue Nazili from his disintegrating world. Strangely enough being eight feet tall and covered in robes from head to foot, didn't get many stares in Hackney. It was the ultimate melting pot after all.

“More weirdos than New York.” As Spider put it.

He even had ID, thanks to a favour from Foxy. The really nice thing though, was coming back from an adventure abroad, with no one after her, no nations with a grudge against her.... As far as she knew. The Ugandans might be a bit miffed at two unwanted holes in the ground, but they weren't likely to send trained assassins to hunt her down.

“HmMMM I love cheese on toast.” Said Nazili

He had to live somewhere and he was still going through the culture shock thing with London and human civilisation in general. Letting him move into a motel was considered far too dangerous. He did still have all the powers of an Arbiter after all.

“I feel bad about tonight, are you sure you don't mind ?” She asked.

“No....Sophie is good company and it's my first trip to....The pictures. To be honest, I still find it exciting to go anywhere by car.”

Everything excited him, which was wonderful but a problem. He seemed to lack any tact or the ability to lie convincingly. Both essential skills for survival in human society. Sophie was taking him to see a movie, his first. He was then going to sleep at Spider's house. So many firsts to enjoy, she actually envied him a little.

“Have the authorities any news on Kallina ?” He asked.

He soaked English up like a sponge, with a real knack at learning colloquialisms. She'd shown him some old seventies TV on a cable channel and he'd sounded like an episode of Minder for the rest of the week. Authorities wasn't the word she'd have used, but it was close enough.

“No sign of her, but she is very good at hiding. I know she's alive, I'm certain of it. She'll be in one of her dens somewhere, letting her wounds heal.”

Or Baba Yaga was finally dead, which was a real possibility. For the moment though, Ruby didn't want to think about that possibility. Nazili finished his cheese on toast, just as her entry phone rang. There was even a screen on it now, another addition by the property company in Bermuda.

“Come on up.” She yelled, as she pressed the button.

Nazili left, they'd probably pass each other on the stairs. Having the flat to themselves for the entire night was rare. If Nazili wasn't there, Sophie would turn up with beer and pizza, or Anna would get fed up with sniping at Sarah and just turn up. She opened the door before he had a chance to bang on it.

“Hi Ruby, I got Thai food on the way.” Said Todd. “And a tin of Tuna for Constanze.”

Ruby had been to the house on the Black Sea coast, it had been her first place to look for Kallina. Of course she'd brought the cat back with her, she could hardly leave her to starve.

~ ~

Which takes us nicely into Ruby IV, which will be posted in instalments starting in the summer of 2021.

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