

Ruby V : Machu Picchu

Chapter 6 - Huancayo

“Fourteen hours on a train. Fourteen hours to sort out plans for the future. Time to prod at old wounds and cause a few more. Plenty of time for grievances to come to the surface. Time enough to strengthen old bonds. Fourteen hours to get ready.....”

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Everyone was on board the High Andes railway and it had left Lima on time. Actually it had left half an hour late, but Ruby chose to consider that as being on time. They were on vacation after all and having a while to settle in on the train, had been useful. Not quite everyone was on the train; there were no agents from DINI. Either the price tag for the journey wasn't within their budget, or they'd decided Ruby and her wunderkinds weren't likely to be attacked on a train full of tourists. Whatever the reason, Ruby chose to see that too, as a good thing.

“I heard you got a tattoo.” Said Thio.

Were they trying to make a group joke out of it ? Spider had asked to see her ink and Sarah had asked just a few minutes later. It seemed to be a thing, a running joke with her as the focus. Spider had given her a schoolboy grin, as she'd shown him the triquetra. Not that Ruby cared, it was just harmless fun. She was actually beginning to love the still healing tattoo and was quite proud of it.

“Has someone put you up to this ?” Ruby Asked.

“No, I just heard it was a cool tattoo.” Said Thio.

His smirk said otherwise, though she wasn't going to delve into his mind. That kind of intrusion was for the serious problems, not her group making fun of her new, and only, ink. They were all likely to ask to see it over and over again, for a day or so. Then it would become boring for them. At that moment Ruby realised what primary school teachers had to put up with.

“Fine, you can see it.” She said. “I'm really pleased with how it looks.”

No pulling the gauze to one side, Ruby had thrown that away just after breakfast. The tattoo artist had told her to keep her new ink covered for two days, but she didn't have a gang of mischievous wunderkinds to contend with. Ruby pulled her blouse down a bit.

“Wow, which symbol means Baba Yaga ?” Asked Thio.

So, they'd begun to trust Thio enough to gossip with him. Something else she chose to think of as a good thing.

“This one.” She said, pointing.

“Wow.”

As Thio left her part of the train carriage, Ruby could see Sophie waiting to approach. Ruby was all in favour of a mild piss take, but she had lot to get done and was hoping to do much of it during a fourteen hour train journey. She put her hand up as Sophie approached.

“Yes....Very amusing, dear Sophie. I need a couple of hours though, I'm busy. Then you can all form and orderly queue.”

“Oh, you know.....Who told ? It's no fun if you know.” Said Sophie.

“No one told me.....I worked it out. How old are you, Sophie ?”

“This year I'll be a hundred and thirty seven. Why ? What has that got to do with anything ?”

She didn't know and in many ways, that was also a good thing. If Sophie lived to be a thousand, she'd still be a child at heart.

"Lily had a new tattoo, Sophie." Said Ruby. "Tease her for a while and circle back to me later."

"And you won't tell the others you know?"

"No, scouts honour."

Everyone knew what that meant, despite none of the wunderkinds ever being a scout. A Spider saying that had become everyone's saying. Ruby doubted if Spider had been a scout though, he didn't seem the type. Spider with a woggle and a staff....Never in a million years. Sophie ran along the carriage and began to mutter at Thio.

"Poor Lily." Muttered Todd.

"It gives me a short period of peace and quiet."

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Sarah wasn't sure if there was an internet link to the train, though she doubted it. Her laptop was back in Lima, in their bedroom at Alessia House. Only Todd had a laptop with him and even he hadn't tried his satellite link. It was nice in a way, to be heading high into the Andes Mountains and away from twenty four hour TV and social media.

"Just so long as it doesn't go on for too long." She muttered.

"Was that question aimed at me?" Asked Spider. "If it was, I don't understand it."

The view out of the train window was beautiful, but not awesome, not yet. The really incredible scenery would begin by mid-afternoon, when the train had climbed high into the mountains. The train rattled and clanged a bit, but Sarah was fine with that. She'd once lived in Highbury and commuted out to Uxbridge every day. Not her choice, it had been during her semi-unemployed period. The Job Centre had set up the interview and would have stopped her benefits, if she'd turned down the job. She'd had a few weird jobs before Ruby had taken her away from all that. The one in Uxbridge hadn't been a bad company and their office was quite nice. Twice a day on the Metropolitan Line though, with all those bone jarring tracks. The High Andean Railway was a far smoother ride.

"No, I was muttering at myself." She said.

"First sign of madness.....No, actually the second sign of madness."

"What's the first then?" Sarah asked.

"I think.....Living with me."

That deserved a kiss on the cheek, though the train was too full of strangers for much in the way of public displays of affection. Sarah took the magazine out of her bag, the one Ruby had brought back from the tattoo parlour. There was a yellow stickit to mark the page with the article.

"Oh, someone had scribbled on the page." She mumbled.

Sarah put her finger up, before Spider could comment on her pet foible again. She liked muttering at herself. It was often the best way to have an interesting conversation. It looked like Lily's writing on the page, in thick blue marker pen. Baba Yaga said the note, with an arrow pointing at a fairly low-definition picture.

"Be an angel.....If I had coffee, this might all make more sense." Said Sarah.

"I'll see if there's cake to go with it." Said Spider.

Someone at the magazine had used a report by someone who'd been there, the dig site up in the mountains. It was probably the same person who'd taken the really bad pictures. Then they'd added what looked like sections from an archaeology text books, finished off with a few notes from somewhere else, maybe Wiki. It was a hodgepodge, but an interesting one.

“Ewww these pictures.” She mumbled. “My old Nokia took better pics.”

Lots of eager young faces, as they held up mud covered finds that were almost impossible to identify. One find looked like an axe head, but it could have been anything muddy. They’d found a standing stone that wouldn’t have looked out of place in Avebury. Were standing stones rare in Peru ? Sarah hadn’t seen any other pictures of them in the museum. An expert was needed; Ruby or Todd would know someone. At the bottom of the standing stone was a deep carving. It really did look like the character from Ruby’s new tattoo.

“Baba Yaga.” She muttered.

Spider returned with what smelled like excellent coffee and looked like, two pieces of delicious cake. He’d been given a tray and they had a table for him to place it on. It suddenly occurred to her that the train was fairly luxurious. It boded well for the evening meal, which everyone had been wondering about.

“How’s it going ?” Asked Spider.

“We’re going to need an expert. A local archaeologist would be perfect.”

The coffee was excellent, as was the cake, which tasted of apricots. Back to the article and Sarah needed her fluent Spanish to read the section that looked to have been lifted from a text book. Probably an advanced text book, she had to guess at the meaning of two words.

“Who do they think reads this thing ?” She muttered.

It seemed there were standing stones in Peru, even a few stones circles. There were even a few standing stones at Machu Picchu. The carvings on the newly found stone were different though, the language used fairly unique. There was definitely nothing else like it in the mountains near Yauli. That name was the single most important fact in most of the waffle. Yauli was a district, not a town or city. It was enough though, to enable them to identify the dig site. Why was the name of a famous East European witch on a standing stone in Peru ? As often happens in such publications, the magazine left that question hanging.

“I guarantee Ruby will want to go to Yauli.” She said.

“Fine by me.....I’m all for a bit of an adventure.” Said Spider.

Sarah decided that fourteen hours was a long time, maybe longer if there were delays. She whispered to Spider that the washrooms were large and clean. He understood and didn’t resist as she held his hand and headed for the closest washroom.

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Sophie had given Ruby some space and time. So much time that most people had visited the buffet car for some lunch. Caleb was getting hers, which freed up Sophie to go into full persuasion mode. She had the book on the Nazca lines in her hand and a notepad covered in scribble. Was it going to be a hard sell to Ruby ? Sophie thought it might go either way.

“We have to go there, I feel it.” Sophie muttered.

Ruby saw her approach and in fairness, she smiled and went along with the assumed running gag.

“Yes Sophie, of course you can see my new ink.” Said Ruby.

“Thanks, but I want to talk about something else.” Said Sophie.

“Ahh....The Nazca people.....I can see your book.” Said Todd.

“Have some food, you must be hungry.” Said Ruby.

They had food in rattan bowls and the food was in opened up paper parcels. Difficult to see what they were eating, but it smelled wonderful. There was also a lot of it, more than Ruby and Todd were likely to eat for lunch.

“Caleb is getting ours.” Said Sophie.

“Nonsense.....Sit and eat, Sophie.”

“I picked up far too much for just us.” Added Todd.

Putting the book and her notes on the table gave Ruby a pretty good idea of what she was going to ask. A book and notes on the Nazca and a shallow look in her mind. Sophie knew Ruby had a way of getting ahead of the pack; she had a way of cutting down the time spent on explanations. Not always nice to lose your mental privacy, but it did save a hell of a lot of time. The food was a kind of vegetable tagine with rice and it tasted wonderful.

“Do you like it ?” Asked Ruby.

“Yes, very good.”

“So, you think we should go to see the Nazca lines ?” Asked Ruby.

The carriage was full of people eating; every seat on the train was taken. Some wouldn't speak English and the train made quite a few noises. Sophie still thought it was essential to lean towards Ruby and talk quietly.

“Yes, we both know that our ancestors taught the ancestors of the Nazca people. The drawings use the same style used in the Karakum.” Said Sophie. “There is a shared past, a common heritage. We could learn so much.”

“You intend to talk to the remnants of the Nazca ?” whispered Todd.

“Knowledge will have been passed down.” Said Sophie. “There may have even been the rare case of interbreeding. We might find another Abe. Doesn't that excite you ?”

“Abe was created by Kurt and Kallina.” Said Ruby. “He is a product of their bio-engineering. A direct ancestor of a Nazca cross breeding with our ancestors.....That would be terrifying, though I'm certain it never happened.”

“How can you be certain ?” Whispered Sophie.

“Because such a bloodline would have prospered and we'd be fighting them for our survival.”

“Just like in Africa.” Added Todd.

“Have you two been discussing this possibility ?” Asked Sophie.

Ruby grabbed her hand and held it for a moment. Ruby was so concerned about something, that anxiety was coming off her in waves.

“I know that Kurt never visited the Nazca, because he was scared of something.” Said Ruby. “Kallina was often in Peru, yet she only once went to see the lines. Something worried her so much, she never went again.”

“What do you think she found ?” Asked Sophie.

“I have no idea.....Some trait passed on to the local population, maybe.” Said Ruby. “Or perhaps something from the distant past, buried under the sands. No one digs in that desert, so as not to damage the lines. That might have saved mankind from some sort of horror....I don't really know.”

“I want to go.....You can't stop me.” Said Sophie. “I'm sure Caleb will go with me.”

The last few words had been loud; a few surprised passengers were looking at her. Ruby was holding her hand again. Sophie snatched it away.....She wasn't a child.

“I just ask that before you do anything....Talk it over with me first.” Said Ruby. “After we've completed most of our vacation, Sophie. Talk to me again in two months' time.”

“That sounds reasonable.” Said Todd.

The double act was annoying, especially as Todd was right. It was a reasonable thing to ask.

“Fine....Whatever.”

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Christine Bull, was known to just about everyone as Chris. A broker who employed her to work for several different organisations had said her looks made it harder for her to be part of the scenery. Not that he meant she was hideous or anything like that. Chris knew she was attractive; she wasn't stupid, or afraid to smile at herself in the mirror while brushing her hair. She'd invested in a few decent wigs that came down low on her forehead and began to develop a looking at her shoes as she walked, quiet introvert, persona. She'd been doing it for so long now, that she thought of that persona as being real. Not like a split personality, but as a different version of her that could be pulled on and off, when needed. That persona even had a name, she thought of her as Smithy. She'd been out and about in Luton, following someone who needed to be followed. The broker had arranged it for a client she'd never know or meet. Smithy had followed a lot of people around, without knowing why. The call was unexpected, though she knew Monique had her number. "My people talked to your people." Monique had said. "The surveillance in Hackney will be cancelled. Confirm that and call me.....We have a job for you."

It happened; she'd had a few cancelled jobs because the target wasn't as important as the client originally thought. The public get the idea from the movies, that the intelligence community are clever and infallible. Sadly that is sometimes far from the truth. As Smithy, she'd joined a group of climate protesters, to follow one young guy. For several months she'd been his shadow, until the client had cancelled the job. Sometime later the broker had told her she'd been following a harmless protester and the client had targeted the wrong guy. Not that Chris was worried, she was paid win or lose, whether the target was the right one, or not. Two days after the call from Monique, her broker told her to cease watching the flat in Hackney.

"Sorry it's ending early." He'd told her. "The client has authorised a sweetener."

The sweetener was a week's pay for doing nothing. A rare and wonderful thing, especially if she didn't have to wait too long for the next job. Of course she called Monique. Creepy maybe, actually very creepy and she had been interrogated, but money is money at the end of the day. No matter who the client might be, their cash was as spendable as anyone else's. Plus, and she hated to admit it, but Cal had got to her. The poor girl was a long way from home and all on her own.

In her full Smithy mode, Chris was now a temporary resident of the flat one floor down from Ruby's. It had been empty for a while it seemed, kept for the occasional special visitor. Well-furnished for a rented flat, living there wasn't going to be a chore. Her assignment was to keep an eye on Cal and befriend the girl when it seemed appropriate and appreciated. In other words, don't smother Cal. An easy job and she was being well paid to do it. About seven thirty in the evening and Chris was feeling hungry, so she knew Cal had to be thinking about ordering something to eat. Chris knocked twice on the door at the top of the stairs.

"Cal.....It's me."

A happy looking Cal let her in and by the time Chris was sat on the sofa, Constanze was on her lap. The large grey cat was obviously quite elderly, but had a purr like a motorboat engine.

"Fancy a coffee ?" Asked Cal.

"Yes please.....Constanze's whiskers are getting so grey.....How old is she ?" Asked Chris.

"Depends who you ask." Said Cal. "Ruby and Sarah swear she was a kitten way back in seventy eighty something, which sounds crazy. Now I've been around her for a while.....She is a very strange cat. Maybe she really was owned by Constanze Mozart."

"Do you have to feed her anything special ?" Asked Chris.

"No, just ordinary cat food and tuna.....She really likes tuna."

Cal rattling coffee cups in the kitchen, gave Chris time to hide her surprise. The people in the top flat were a strange lot; there was no getting round that. A cat born in seventeen eighty something though.....

“How are getting on with Angie ?”

Asked Cal, as she brought in the coffee.

“Yes fine, though she has been giving me a bit of a grilling.” Said Chris. “She seems to think my life from birth to now is all her business. Luckily, I have a lot of well memorised stories. Some are like old friends and being honest.....I sometimes can't remember which ones are real.”

“So, you didn't really push that policeman into the river ?”

“Hey, that story was for your ears only. And yes, it really did happen, during my time with an animal rights group. You should have seen his face.....Anyway, Angie seems happy with my street cred.”

Chris wasn't scared of Constanze, but a cat that might be close to two hundred and forty years old, deserved to be treated with respect. As the large cat crept up her chest and bumped noses, it was irresistible. Chris kissed Constanze on her nose. Much to her relief, the loud purr, became even louder.

“Oh, you've done it now.” Said Cal.

“Why ?”

“You'll be her friend for life now.....I'm hungry, shall we order something ?” Asked Cal.

“Yes, that would be great.....Then that new spy thing is on Netflix.”

“What do you fancy ?”

“Anything except burgers, I seemed to have lived on them for a while.” Said Chris.

“There's a place that does Moroccan food.....Really nice and definitely....No burgers.”

“Fine.....Order enough for a family of six, I'm starving.” Said Chris.

Cal would pay, that was another perk of the job, or fast becoming one. There was a bedside cabinet in Cal's bedroom with half the reserves of the Bank of England in the drawer, or so it seemed. Plus the girl had a debit card which appeared to have no limits. Ruby may have left Cal on her own in a strange city, but she hadn't left her penniless.

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Sophie had discovered that privacy was a real problem on a packed train. The much looked forward to evening meal, had been wonderful. Collected by them and eaten where they sat, but Sophie quite liked that. A typical Peruvian dinner of creamy chicken and potatoes in spicy cheese sauce. Lily had been worried they might be offered cooked guinea pig, though that never materialised. A filling meal that left Sophie wanting just one more thing to make it a perfect evening. It wasn't just that she ached for Caleb; she also needed privacy to talk to him about something important.

“I know for a fact that Sarah and Spider used one of the washrooms.” She said.

“Does it sound bad ? I've already arranged something.” Said Caleb.

“No, not at all.....Where did you find for us to be alone ?”

“Please don't think I'm taking it for granted.”

“No I won't.....Tell me, Caleb. What have you arranged ?”

It was awful, and wonderful, there was a tingle beginning in her groin. It was like being a teenager again. Her whole mind was full of erotic memories, all linked to having sex with Caleb. It was as if she'd been at sea for years, yet it had been less than a day.

“The kitchen staff have various storage areas and as the food gets eaten.....There are spaces. Not free, there is a fee, though they do supply blankets and pillows. Not cheap, it seems demand always exceeds supply.”

“Wonderful.....How much do I need to pay them ?” She asked.

“Nothing, I’ve already paid them.”

“So, you are taking it for granted ?” She teased.

“Yes, I suppose I am.”

“Good.....Come on, show me our love nest.”

“It is a dried goods store.....Don’t expect too much, Sophie.”

She’d have settled for a gritty floor and a few old sacks to lie on, though she wasn’t about to tell him that. Caleb led the way and she left it to him to talk to one of the junior kitchen staff.

“It’s all ready.” Caleb said.

In her mind she kept thinking it was like being a teenager again, but in truth, her teens had been full of training and hiding from those that wished them harm. The memories making her wet, were relatively recent ones. As Caleb opened the store door, she was ready for him to screw her up against the wall.

“Is it alright ? Will it do ?” He asked her.

It was probably a regular money earner for the kitchen staff. Providing a love nest for horny tourists. Curtains had been placed over sacks of something or other. There were rugs on the floor, with a couple of clean looking blankets. A couple of pillows and a few LED lights hung from the ceiling. For a boudoir created by a few kitchen staff, it was marvellous.

“Does the door lock ?” She asked.

For an answer, Caleb flipped a simple catch into the closed position. Not much of a lock, but no one could simply walk in on them while they were in flagrante delicto. There was a smell of uncooked rice, probably from the sacks and Sophie felt a slight need to pee. All that was forgotten though, as she began to undress.

“Not your knickers, I’ll take them off.” Said Caleb.

He was slower than her, probably all the buttons on his shirt. Sophie helped him undress, before lying on the rugs. Caleb knelt next to her and for a few minutes, he seemed to be happy to look at her. That was nice it made her feel appreciated. Just so long as it didn’t go on for too long.

“I will never take you for granted.” Said Caleb.

He was usually slower at taking off her panties, as if savouring every second. Not that she minded him hurrying that part. After removing her underwear, Caleb used his tongue on her intimate parts. By the time his dick was inside her, Sophie had forgotten all about the smell of rice and the slight need to pee.

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“The plan is to go to our hotel first, then go to the college later in the day.” Said Todd.

Another quiet conversation, barely out of earshot of the other passengers. Todd was getting used to it though and as Ruby had pointed out. Most of the tourists were too busy with their own affairs to worry about them.

“Besides.....If any of them get over interested in us, I’ll pick it up.” She’d said.

It wasn’t late, but everyone seemed to be resting after the evening meal. He was alone with Thio, making sure he understood everything about where Thio claimed Serge would be waiting. Not necessarily waiting there when they arrived, but he’d be there, eventually. Todd was already worried about how much a no show by Serge, might affect Ruby. He was also worried about Serge showing up. Either option brought its own problems.

“Why would Serge choose the Colegio Ramiro Villaverde Lazo ?” Asked Todd. “Does it have an importance to him.....Something personal maybe ?”

"I have no idea; we had one very brief conversation." Said Thio. "I might have forgotten all about it, if your friends hadn't chosen to use that restaurant for their lunch."

Todd had taken lots of notes and agreed the marks on the map with Thio. The south side of the Colegio Ramiro Villaverde Lazo. There was a footpath; Todd had examined it many times on Google. Wait at a certain spot Thio had marked on the map and Serge would arrive. How would Serge know they were there? He was in one of the houses in a new construction project; Serge could see the footpath from where he lived. It all sounded like a fairy tale to Todd, but he knew Ruby desperately wanted to believe in it. In a way the worst part was that Ruby had to be there, it was part of the instructions. If Serge didn't show up, she'd have been stood there, waiting in all weathers, for an hour or more a day. Thio was yawning in a meaningful way.

"I know it's late, but I need to know everything you know." Said Todd. "You're sure it's this footpath, beside the.....Sorry tiny writing...Avienda Los Libertados?"

"Yes, and he said it's a safe place to wait." Said Thio.

"It seems to have been a long conversation with Serge." Said Todd. "And you picked up all these details, which I'm still trying to make sure I know."

"I'm not lying.....Why would I lie?" Snapped Thio.

Two interests passengers looked up, raised voices tended to cause most people to show an interest in what was going on. Ruby was right though, they were with their families and friends and two arguing guys would hold their attention for about five seconds.

"Keep your voice down." Hissed Todd. "I'm still not sure about you, Thio. I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, but if Ruby is attacked at that nice safe place to wait.....You will regret it."

"I'm telling the truth." Muttered Thio.

"Fine.....The roundabout fifty yards from the waiting point.....There's a café on it." Said Todd.

"While Ruby waits, we'll all be taking it in turns to wait at that café. You will be there every day, while Ruby is stood on that footpath. No excuses, no wandering off.....You will be there."

"Fuck, Todd.....I'm on your side."

"You will be there....Understood?" Asked Todd.

"Yes, sure.....I'll drink enough coffee to give a horse insomnia."

Thio's English was good, too damned good. The story was ridiculously over complex for one conversation with a dead man, Serge. The more often Todd went through it, the more certain he became that Thio was full of shit. The best outcome as he saw it was a no show by Serge. Ruby would get over it and they'd all had an outing on the famous High Andes railway. The worst option was Ruby being attacked while waiting out in the open. If that happened, Thio wouldn't be seeing another birthday.

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Caleb woke up and instantly realised the one massive drawback with their storeroom love nest. No bathroom and he really needed a pee. A bucket would have done, or even one of those things guys could use on long car journeys. Not exactly designed to enhance a romantic evening, but better than an overfull bladder. Sophie was lying next to him, a satisfied smile on her face. There was no option though, for several reasons he had to wake her. For a start, eventually Ruby would come looking for them, or arrange for a search party. He kissed Sophie's forehead.

"Wake up.....We can't sleep in here all night." He said.

Sophie's eyes opened and she looked around, as if working out where she was. Most of the smile was still there.

"What time is?" She asked.

"It's late.....And I really need to pee." He said.

"Oh, so do I, now you've mentioned it. They should put a bucket in the corner."

"Exactly what I thought." He said.

Undressing had been fun, but putting back on the same grubby clothes, wasn't. No last minute checks, they didn't even have a mirror. For better or worse, they released the catch on the door and walked along the corridor. Going through the kitchens to get there had been fun, but now everywhere was in darkness. One or two night lights, but the kitchens were fairly dark. Sophie walked the wrong way at a corner and found a room which seemed to excite her.

"It's a staff toilet." She said.

Gloomy rather than totally dark, there was a glow from a sign coming over the top of the door. Still an effort to fit in there together, though they managed it. Sophie was actually giggling, as she removed the knickers she'd only just put on.

"Please.....I really need to go first." Said Caleb.

"Fine.....I'll sit on your lap."

It was strangely comfortable, peeing with her sat there, on his lap, giggling.

"I keep thinking about how approving Kallina would have been....Of all this." Said Sophie.

"Don't you mean disapprove?"

"Oh, you didn't know Kallina that well."

Her turn and despite her insistence, he couldn't bring himself to sit on her lap. Caleb sort of scrunched himself up and sat on the floor next to her. It was grubby in there; he could feel the gritty floor against his buttocks.

"This is.....Actually, quite good fun." Said Sophie.

No good, it was irresistible. Once Sophie had finished, he kissed her. She kissed him back, so he touched her. Sex in a cramped grubby toilet, suddenly seemed like a brilliant idea.

"No....Actually yes, but I need to tell you something first." Said Sophie.

They ended up with both of them sat on the toilet, side by side. Uncomfortable, his left leg was likely to begin giving him pins and needles fairly quickly. Sophie kissed his cheek.

"I asked Ruby about going to the Nazca Lines and she said no." Said Sophie.

"Why? Isn't there time? We are here for several months."

Caleb had no superpowers, but he was beginning to understand Sophie. She was nuzzling his neck and seemed quite anxious.

"Actually Ruby said maybe, but I know she means no." Said Sophie. "There are dangers associated with the Nazca people, they knew our ancestors. It is my people who taught their people....How to draw images to be seen by the Gods."

"Wow, that must open up a whole new can of worms." Said Caleb.

"Yes, Ruby said that something about the Nazca terrified Kallina." Said Sophie. "The problem is that Ruby keeps treating me like a child. She won't tell me what scared Kallina. She says she doesn't know, but she does.....I can feel it."

Was he going to be honest with her? Of course he was, he wasn't going to keep anything from her. Especially now, when she was feeling sensitive about not being totally in the loop with Ruby.

"I watch all of you and Ruby does that a lot." He said. "Probably to protect you all, but every time something big comes along, she keeps the worst bits to herself. Time after time she did it in Europe, Africa and again in Norway. You either accept it, or stand up to her."

Poor Sophie, she was trembling. He loved her and felt love coming back from her. Had he gone too far? He hoped not.

“Do you know why kittens have claws ?” Asked Sophie.

“Is that a riddle ?”

“Ruby tells a story sometimes, usually when she’s had too much to drink. From back when she was in love with a gangster, a really ruthless character called Jurgis. She often refuses to admit she loved him, but Olga knew her then and Olga says he was one of Ruby’s great loves. You must know the difference between simply being in love and a great love ?”

“Oh yes, Sophie.....I do.”

“Jurgis had this thing.....He said kitten had claws so that they could use them.” Said Sophie. “Ruby understood that all too well, she nearly burned all the skin off his chest, without understanding how she’d done it.”

“That sounds like a toxic relationship.” Said Caleb.

“It was, it really was, though Jurgis was dead long before I met Ruby.”

“Did she kill him ?” Asked Caleb.

Sophie had her face pressed against his and she was crying. He had the impression she was crying out of anger, rather than tears.

“Listen.....None of that matters now and our claws have grown sharper than those of a kitten. I know Charlotte has often walked away from conflict with Ruby, as has Eugenie. If we were to get into a serious fight.....With our sharp adult claws. Someone might die. That can’t happen, Caleb. It can’t happen.”

Later he never really knew why he’d suggested it, though he was glad he had. Ruby was like a mother to the wunderkinds, especially now Kallina was gone. He could understand why the idea of serious conflict with Ruby, was unthinkable to Sophie.

“We’ll go.....No arguments.” He said. “No fights, no stress.....When you’re ready we’ll just hire a camper van and go. Just us Sophie, we’ll go and see the Nazca desert.”

“Thank you, that sounds perfect.”

If anything the partition wall of the toilet was even grubbier than the floor. That didn’t stop them though, as Sophie matched him, thrust for thrust. By the time they were dressed and back in their seats, it wasn’t far off sunrise.

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It wasn’t really cold as the train approached Huancayo, but it wasn’t exactly warm either. There had been a slow climb up to ten thousand feet and there was a slight mist over the top of the train tracks. Quite a few very noisy junctions, there was no way of not knowing the train had reached its destination. Ruby had the window open with her head out far enough to see where they were going. “Fifteen hours with the late start.....Not bad.” Said Todd. “I’d definitely use the train again, if we ever come back to Lima.”

“You can see the mountains through the mist.....Come and look, you have to see this.”

Todd joined her, both of them ignoring the sign about not putting their heads out of the window. Like a couple of college backpackers, they watched Huancayo Station appear out of the gloom.

“Oh, it’s not much of a station.” Said Todd.

“It’ll do, I wasn’t expecting a Peruvian version of Paddington Station.”

There hadn’t been much taken out of the bags, so there hadn’t been much to repack. Ruby had made sure everything was ready, a good two hours before reaching Huancayo.

“Have you got the list ?.....We can’t leave one of the kids on the train.” Said Ruby.

“Yes, very funny.” Said Todd. “That’s actually too close to the truth to be funny.”

A few of the other passengers were keen to get off the train. While Ruby grabbed her luggage, a steady stream of them were stepping down onto the platform and turning right. By the time Todd and her left the train, the mist had almost cleared. Assuming the other passengers knew the way to go, she turned right.

“Wow, I hope Sarah is getting pictures of all this.” Said Ruby.

There were mountains everywhere, no matter where she looked. There was also a rusting old train in front of the best view, but she chose to think that added a certain charm.

“I think.....I’m going to like it here.” Said Todd.

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