

Ruby 3

Chapter 24 – Through The Shroud

“Sarah was currently sat on the tail board of one of the four wheel drives, with a gun in her lap. She looked like death warmed up and had a huge bandage across one side of her head. Full of guts though and willing to fight anyone who might try to force her onto the helicopter to the hospital.”

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The attack had been fast and confusing, the fire and smoke of battle hadn't helped. Ruby stood next to the enormous burned, crushed and blasted bodies of the Nagala.

“There were three of them.” She said.

“I was closer to the tunnel.....I only saw two.” Said Ishel.

Ruby wasn't in the mood to be contradicted by Ishel; she simply made the statement for a second time.

“There were three of them.”

“Blood over here.....Something big went through the scrub.” Shouted Kallina. “Quite a lot of blood, I doubt that it lived for long.”

Ruby's first thought was for the settlement and the kids that lived there.

“Which direction was it heading ?” She asked.

Everyone had seen two very dead Nagala. They'd relaxed, why wouldn't they, the threat looked to have been dealt with. Now there were signs of a third still on the loose, Ruby could feel their agitation rapidly growing. Even a nearly dead Nagala probably had the strength of ten men.

“I'm not sure....” Said Kallina.

“Here..... Here.....It was heading behind the antitank guns.” Shouted Sophie. “I can see blood and a few trampled bushes.”

Away from the settlement at least and as far as Ruby knew, there had been no one in the direction the crushed bushes were leading her. No matter how fast she ran, the bad news always seemed to be keeping ahead of her.

“Sarah's been hurt.” She heard someone shout.

Todd and Rory were already there and had a first aid pack open, by the time Ruby arrived. There was an area of flattened grass covered in blood. There was even an unidentifiable piece of flesh, which she hoped had once belonged to the Nagala. Sarah was moving, muttering at Rory.

“Is she alright ? Is Sarah alright ?” Asked Ruby.

Sarah was her good luck charm. Sarah had often seemed indestructible. It was unthinkable that Sarah might be seriously injured. Ruby pushed her way past Fabio, who looked too shocked to move.

“It was my fault Ruby.....I just needed to pee....Spider told me to hold it.” Said Sarah.

“Oh Sarah, are you alright ?”

“She's got concussion and a few cuts and bruises.” Said Rory. “We're still checking her over, but.....Miraculously apart from that, she seems to be fine.”

Checking her over sounded like servicing an old car, not treating her best friend. Ruby hugged Sarah, even though she did say it made the bruises hurt.

“I should have waited Ruby, but you know me.....Spider came to guard me while I....You know. The thing grabbed him in its jaws, as though he was a toy. All my fault.....All my fault.”

Ruby gave her friend a smile, with just enough mojo in it to calm her down.

“Where did it take him Sarah ? Which direction ?”

“That way....I think.” She said, pointing. “I was a bit giddy.... But, yes, definitely that way.”

“Look after her.”

Ruby shouted over her shoulder as she began to run again. It seemed even technology had decided to beat her to everywhere. Someone had powered up one of Rory’s recently acquired drones. The flying camera platform had arrived too late to help her survey the area, but it shot over her head to look for Spider and the injured Nagala.

“She wandered off into the scrub to pee.....Fuck ! How could she be so stupid ?”

Ruby muttered to herself, though she’d never let Sarah know her true thoughts. Even if Spider was only slightly hurt, Sarah would never forgive herself. If he was dead ?.....Ruby pushed the thought from her mind. He was an ex-soldier who often collected debts for a living. Often there was some physical violence involved in collecting those debts. Spider was as tough as old boots.

“No, he’s tougher ! He has to be alright.”

He had to be, Spider was another of her indestructible friends. There were times when he seemed to be made out of the same stuff aircraft black box recorders were made of. Of course he was going to be alright.

“Not far ahead of you, watch the drone.”

Damn, even Kallina seemed to be one step ahead of her, pushing thoughts into her head. The drone was hovering over a spot in some thick grasses, no more than twenty yards away. A harmless piece of technology, but to Ruby it looked like a vulture hovering over a place where death was waiting. By the time she pushed the grass to one side and saw the scene, Charlotte was beside her.

“Crap ! That thing was huge.” She said.

The Nagala was dead and Spider was lying next to it with a gun in his hand. Ruby didn’t think a simple projectile weapon could have killed a Nagala that was fit and well, but one that was already severely injured.....It was a nice thought that Spider might have given the brute the final injury to finish it off. Had Spider survived the battle though ? Ruby knelt one side of him, Charlie the other, her hand against his neck.

“He’s got a pulse.....Faint but it’s there.” Said Charlie.

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Malou had been worried about Eugenie being out all night. She ran a busy hotel though and although she thought of any woman under forty as a girl, Eugenie was a grown woman. Plus of course she was one of Ruby’s wunderkinds, one of the thirteen. It was still a huge relief when the night time duty manager had tapped on her door at just after six in the morning.

“Sorry to disturb you.....The front desk noticed Eugenie return to the hotel about an hour ago.” He’d told her.

He’d know her routine, most of the staff quickly picked up the hour in the morning when the owner of the hotel usually appeared. Malou had thanked him and felt immensely relieved. It was going to be quite a day in one way or another. George was going back to London, though she was going to be seeing a lot more of him. After checking herself at least three times in the mirror, Malou decided she was ready to do her first walk of the day around her empire. She went back to her bed and pulled the sheet away from the head it was covering.

“George.....Sorry, but you need to wake up, just for a moment.”

“Oh....Yes, breakfast.....I did promise.”

Oh dear, they had rather overdone the wine the night before. Malou felt a little rough herself, but she refused to let it affect her usual routine.

“No hurry George, get up when you’re ready. Eugenie is safe; she’s back in the hotel.”

“Brilliant.....I always had faith in her.”

A complete reversal of his hours of panic the night before. Malou pulled the sheet back over his head and made her way to the freight elevator at the rear of the building. She had a routine, even if she suspected the staff used to it to keep one step ahead of her. The elevator took her down to the kitchens with that wonderful smell of a busy hotel kitchen getting ready to feed the guests. The main aroma was that of fresh bread, combined with bacon frying, or maybe sausage. The third ingredient was always a hint of cinnamon. The scent of her hotel starting up for the day, it never ceased to excite her.

“Good morning Jules.”

“Good morning Malou.”

Not a famous chef, but business people came from all over Paris for one of his breakfasts. Next on her usual routine was the inspection of one or two rooms where the guests had left to catch an early flight. Malou liked to see a few rooms before the cleaners had got to them.

“I know it sounds strange, but I get a feel of how the guests are using the rooms.”

She’d told George, though she could see he didn’t really get it. Sometimes she thought that only the people who ran hotels, understood other people who ran hotels. As she came out of a recently vacated room and locked the door, George was standing in the corridor.

“I came to find you for breakfast.” He said. “Eugenie is waiting at our usual table, with Seong of course.”

“I’m amazed George. I didn’t think we’d see her until late afternoon.”

“I know, and she looks fresh as daisy.”

George didn’t look as fresh as a daisy. The bags under his eyes always looked worse if they’d over indulged the previous evening. Malou didn’t begrudge the young their ability to get two hours sleep and look perfect, but she was a little jealous. They found Eugenie looking fresh and rested, at Malou’s table to the rear of the entrance lobby. Next to her was Seong, in her carry cot.

“I see you managed to pry Nari’s child away from Dana.” Said Malou.

“Only just, even Giles was getting a bit clingy. I can see them having a child by this time next year.”

“Yes, I think they will too Eugenie.”

George was looking at them as though they were both speaking Swahili.

“But.....Neither of them wants children. They’ve told me several times.”

“Oh George.” Said Eugenie.

“What ?”

Malou rolled her eyes at Eugenie and they both chuckled. George was a normal caring man, which meant he missed at least half the body language and signals in any given situation. The waiter arrived and took their order. They were a long way from any of the guests, so Malou thought it was safe to ask.

“So..... How did things go with Gérard Villand ?”

“Very well, better than I could have hoped for. I managed to get close enough to influence him, though I think he would have come over to us anyway. I did promise him quite a decent payment to send in reports that Pablo and Jai are never seen on the premises, or anywhere near here. Long term he’s very keen on providing people to pass on messages, deliver packages and the occasional piece of surveillance.....I’m afraid I have spent your money without asking.”

“Money well spent by the sound of it.” Said George. “How much did you promise him ?”

Malou was sure he was right, though she wasn't sure whose money had been spent. Was George going to pick up the bill or her ? Or perhaps Ruby might be feeling in a generous mood. The arrival of breakfast gave Malou a chance to think about how much ready cash she could get hold of in a hurry. When Eugenie told them the amount, she stopped worrying about it.

“You did incredibly well Eugenie.” She said. “I must admit, I'd have gladly paid him two or three times that amount.”

“I hate to say it, but he must be rather elderly.” Said George.

“He is, I'd say over eighty.” Said Eugenie. “He has a network of young people and some seem to be very good. I did politely mention continuity should anything happen to him.”

“Oh, I bet you were popular.” Said Malou.

“Hmmm he did pull a face, but he assured me there are plans in place. I also promised that once Ruby has finished her current.....Activity in Africa, he was to come here and meet her, over a meal.”

“Sounds a great idea, especially as I'll be in Paris quite a bit.” Said George.

“I knew it....All those secret trips with Xue.” Said Eugenie. “You're setting up an office in Paris, aren't you George ?”

Malou was a little surprised that Eugenie had guessed their big secret. She was also a bit concerned that George might think she'd blabbed.

“I never told her George, not a single word.” She said.

“That's fine, it never was meant to be kept secret. There always has been an office here, run almost as a franchise. All very much at an arm's length from London. A few people have been paid off and now it will be run by me. So I'll be in Paris quite a bit from now on.”

“That makes it easier to tell you both about my plans.” Said Eugenie.

Was it childish to be upset that Eugenie seemed to be stamping on, what should have been her big day ? George was going to be a major part of her life. It was huge, stupendous, and Eugenie had stolen her thunder. Malou was too polite to show her feeling.

“Come on Eugenie, tell all ?” She asked.

“I hadn't made up my mind until I heard Charlotte was going to make her home in Paris. I'm going to stay here too. I'm hoping George might be able to make use of me occasionally, and I have a few ideas on how I might earn a living. Plus I think Villand might need a whammy booster shot once or twice a year.”

“That sounds a good idea, have you told Ruby ?” Asked George.

“Not really....Actually only a brief hint some time ago. I was born in Paris in eighteen twenty nine and I know it sounds crazy.....But since I've been here, it's felt like coming home.”

Malou held the girl's hand and gave it a squeeze.

“And you can stay at the hotel for as long as you like.” She said. “You have to tell Ruby your plans though, she is the closest thing you all have to a mother.”

“Oh....I will....I will.”

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“I called in a helicopter, a private one out of Kampala.” Said Rory. “No lying, or hiding anything from them, it will take Spider to the best hospital in the city. What is his proper name by the way ?”

“Rupert..... Rupert Bailey.” Said Ruby.

“Christ, an army guy called Rupert.” Said Todd. “No wonder he doesn't want anyone knowing. Rupert is what we call the posh twit officers. The useless ones who are more harm than help.”

“Enough of that crap soldier.” Said Rory.

Poor Spider was already strapped into the home made stretcher that had been made for Anna. He didn't look good and hadn't regained consciousness. But as Todd had put it;

"Think of the story he'll have to tell down the pub. He killed a Nagala, single handed. I'd love to be able to give him the head as proof, but Rory said no. I did get quite a few pictures though, of Spider lying next to the brute.....He'll never have to buy a pint again."

Ruby knew it was all part of getting her to stop worrying. All the bravado and pretending nothing terrible had happened. The soldiers were good at it though, especially Todd. Their attitude was working, it was breaking through the wall of despair. There was Spider though, strapped into a stretcher, waiting for a helicopter ambulance to arrive.

"How is he ?" She asked. "Will he live ?"

"Of course he will." Said Rory.

"Stop giving me the bright and breezy treatment.....How bad is he.....Really ?"

She could have given Rory one her smiles, but she wanted him his usual grumpy self when they faced whatever was inside the shroud.

"Alright it's bad Ruby.....Broken bones, some internal bleeding...Definitely a fractured skull. Worst problem he has is the amount of blood he's lost. Plus..... He doesn't seem to have lived what anyone would call a healthy lifestyle. It all matters, especially as you get older."

Getting older ! Ruby was about to object to that, until she remembered that Spider would be forty at his next birthday.

"But he will live ?" She asked.

"I'm not even a trained battlefield medic. I've done what I can for him, but he needs to get to that hospital. Truthfully.....I have no idea if he'll make it or not.....Sorry, but you did ask."

"I know I did."

"Doc will be waiting for the helicopter and he'll go with Spider. He knows the local people to some extent, certainly a lot better than any of us. I did try to talk Sarah into going too....But you know Sarah."

"Oh yes, I know Sarah."

Sarah was currently sat on the tail board of one of the four wheel drives, with a gun in her lap. She looked like death warmed up and had a huge bandage across one side of her head. Full of guts though and willing to fight anyone who might try to force her onto the helicopter to the hospital.

"Are we going, or are we leaving it until another day ?" Asked Tlal.

Tlal already had Anna slung across her back, like a woman carrying an overgrown child. Ruby felt the temptation to abandon the trip underground, after all, Spider and Sarah had both been injured.

Delay was likely to bring the Ugandan authorities looking around. Delay might also cause the apocalypse she'd viewed in the ancient device. There was also another potential problem.

"We're going, right now !" She said.

No one argued with her, though only Kallina would understand the need to move, and move quickly. The tunnel had been a decent piece of work under the circumstances, but it hadn't been built to last. A day or two and it might collapse.

"You heard the lady." Yelled Rory. "We're carrying on as planned. Everyone to the positions we practised."

Ruby knelt down and kissed Spider on the lips, while breathing some of her strength into him. Not a huge amount, she needed to be strong to face whatever the Arbiters called 'The Curse.' Just a little extra life force to help Spider survive the trip on the helicopter to Kampala. As she stood up, there was a kiss for Doc, though only on the cheek.

“Look after him Mukami Kibore.” She said.

“Like he was my own brother Ruby, you have my word.”

That was it, whatever needed to be said, had been said. There were one or two stragglers and of course, there were now two holes in the agreed order to descend the tunnel. Sarah joined Ruby without asking, right at the front.

“I should make you stay behind.” Said Ruby.

“You could try.”

“Fine.....Just don’t shoot anyone who might be friendly.”

Ruby had seen enough old films to know the guy at the front always said something. It might be waggons roll, or let’s move out, but it was always something along those lines. She looked back at her small army of humans and hybrids, and hoped they all lived to see another day.

“I’m going to set a nice easy pace.” She shouted. “Here we go.”

It wasn’t exactly how John Wayne would have said it, but everyone followed her down the tunnel.

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The more time that went by, the more certain she was that not telling George had been a good idea. Penny had so wanted to tell him about the plan Lily had described to her. If he hadn’t been in Paris, she’d definitely have told him. George had gone to see Malou to unwind, Penny had understood that. Calling him with a problem, that might not be a problem at all....Surely Lily wasn’t crazy enough to actually do it ? Gradually the desire not to burden George had won and she now had no intention of telling him, ever. Like all worried conspirators, she felt the need to talk to someone, but there was that saying about two people being able to keep a secret, but only if one of them was dead.

“I’ll just be careful about what I say.....Very careful.”

No using the office phone, the recent problem with the rogue Das Geheimnis had shown her how easily internal communications could be recorded and traced. Penny found a number in her hand written diary and dialled it on her own cellphone. A young girl answered quickly in Hungarian, which Penny barely understood. She might have been able to buy a bottle of wine in a market, but following a fast conversation was impossible.

“I’m sorry..... Does anyone there speak English.” She asked.

“I do, this is District Four Logistics, can I help you ?”

District Four Logistics, so that was what Olga was calling her legit business these days.

“Is Olga in the office ?”

“I’m not sure.....May I know who’s calling ?”

“Penny..... Penny from the Polandrous Foundation.”

“One moment, I’ll try to connect you.”

Damn, Penny had meant to be so careful. If anyone was monitoring the calls to Olga’s business and it was quite likely they were. Then they’d now have her giving her name and the name of George’s company.

“Shit....I’m such an amateur at this.” She muttered.

“At what Penny ?..... You mean cloak and dagger stuff ?”

“Sorry Olga.....I..... It’s been one of those days. Actually it’s been one of those years.”

“I take it you need my help ? So..... Is it someone you need taken care of in a Robert De Niro kind of way, or just a body disposed of ?” Asked Olga.

For a moment Penny though her heart might have actually stopped beating. First her chest had tightened, but now it felt completely hollow. She was sweating too, sweating everywhere from the back of her legs to the tip of her nose.

“Oh.....I.....” She managed to mutter.

“Relax Penny, fuck..... You really aren’t used to dealing with.....These kinds of things. Relax.....Really you can relax. The cops don’t tap phones for the hell of it, not even in Budapest. If they’d gone through all the hoops to get the paperwork required, I’d know about it. Most importantly, courts tend to frown on cops who try to use obvious jokes as evidence.... Again, even in Budapest.”

“Sorry Olga, you must think I’m an idiot.”

“No I don’t, at least you’re trying to be careful. Just remember that real life isn’t like the movies. So.....I take it you have a problem I can help with ?”

At last, the part of the conversation she’d been rehearsing in her mind for hours.

“I need some equipment transported from London to a..... Difficult location in a troubled part of the world.” Said Penny.

“Then you definitely called the right people. I take it this equipment is super fragile and.....Sensitive in nature ?”

Penny had hoped to do it all so much better once they were onto the details but her chest was feeling hollow again. She was even having trouble focusing her eyes on the clock on her desk. Penny had been quite carefree about dealing with the police, until Special Branch had raided the office. That had been some time ago, but it had permanently dented her belief that George was immune to such things.

“Sorry, I’m finding all this quite difficult Olga. If I made sure all their expenses were paid, could you send someone to see me ?” She asked.

There was a moment of silence, which in her present state, Penny thought wasn’t a good omen.

“I will make sure they’re paid for their time.” Penny added.

“I was just thinking..... You’re not the only one to have had a bad day, but mine has lasted for a few months. I could show you the bruises, so.....What if I came over to London myself ? It’d be nice to get away from Budapest for a couple of days.”

“That would be brilliant Olga. I can then talk to you properly about the consignment. But.....And I hate to seem ungrateful.... Time is a factor and you must be busy.”

“No, I don’t mean a short holiday when I can get a bit of free time.” Said Olga. “I can book a flight right now and be with you tomorrow. The usual routine is for me to find a place close to your office that does decent coffee, and text you when I’m there..... Is, say.....Somewhere between two and three tomorrow alright ?”

“That will be brilliant, thank you.”

“Good, I just booked the ticket.”

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It was still quite hot and humid, once Charlotte clambered over the debris at the end of the tunnel. The walk down the tunnel hadn’t been that difficult, apart from where Kallina had broken through from the vertical shaft. All that boiling hot water had brought rubble with it, lots of rubble. Ruby had cleared it out of the way with a few of her force walls, but those had weakened the roof of the tunnel. They were there though, just over two miles below the surface.

“It feels like a sauna.” Said Kallina.

“There was a time, when just the problems involved with getting here.....But she did it. Ruby came up with a solution.” Said Charlie.

Rory and the soldiers had the serious lighting and were still unpacking and assembling. Ruby was up the front still, moving her head from side to side, to aim her helmet light deep into the caves.

“Lots of puddles of steaming water.” Said Ruby. “Not bad though, could have been worse. The science guy in London must have calculated the water yield pretty accurately.”

“It’s you Ruby, you did it.” Said Sarah. “You’re bloody amazing.”

“Being honest; I never thought it would work.” Said Charlie.

They were all looking in her direction, every helmet light hitting her like a spotlight.

“What ? Come on you lot.” She said. “Be truthful; you’re all as amazed as I am..... We’re here... Two and bit fucking miles under Uganda.”

“I always knew we’d do it.” Said Sophie.

Rory had spent quite a few evenings talking to people in London. Not just the antitank guns had arrived in crates at Tororo airport, marked as mining equipment. The lighting arrays on wheels had looked a bit eccentric while they were in pieces, but Rory had thought they were worth carrying down the tunnel. As they arrays came to life, Charlotte tended to agree with him.

“That’s more like it.” Said Kallina.

“I can see signs of cave-ins.” Said Rory. “We’ll need to be careful.”

“Millions upon millions of litres of boiling water.....It’s miracle the entire cave system didn’t collapse.” Said Todd.

“It didn’t though.” Said Ruby. “Come on, we need to be moving.”

“We needs five more minutes to get the lighting arrays mobile.” Said Rory.

Ruby didn’t reply, which was rare. Charlotte thought Ruby was one of the most polite people she’d ever known. It was as if Ruby had forgotten about Rory completely. She was trudging up to the top of pile of rubble, while pointing into the darkness beyond their lights.

“There.....I can feel something.” She said. “Something alive.”

“I can feel it too now.” Said Charlie. “Something big... It must be one of the Nagala that survived.”

“It survived being inundated in boiling water, in the dark.” Said Graham. “What the hell are these things ?”

“Creations of my ancestors, lifeforms they created.” Said Ishel.

As they all looked towards where Ruby was pointing, Charlie felt the heat in her hands. The sensation of intense heat without burning. She looked and her arms and hands were covered in flames.

“Such power for one so young.” Said Kallina.

“I am a creature of the flames.” Said Charlie. “I used to fight against it, but now I see it as a gift to be used. Something happened to me since I was born, or was done to me. I will no longer resist the temptation to use the burning.”

The cave system had probably been natural once, a group of caves beneath the main city of the Ancient Das Geheimnis, though they’d probably had a proper name for themselves then. Parts of the caves had been reinforced in places by brick arches and some walls had been built. The caves now looked far from natural, more like a vaulted cellar than anything created by nature. As Charlie waited she kept getting glimpses of the Nagala, as it ran behind walls, or pillars.

“There it is, I see it.” Shouted Todd.

He was aiming an assault rifle in the direction of the beast, which didn’t suit Charlie at all.

“Leave this one.....It’s mine.” She said.

The army guys managed to get the lighting arrays rolling on wheels, just as the Nagala ran out of walls to stay behind. Fully lit by several rows of bright lights, the brute looked even fiercer, even more brutal, even more unnatural. It was limping slightly on its left front leg, which disappointed

Charlie. She'd wanted to face a Nagala in full health and beat it on her own. Someone fired at the beast with a hand gun.

"I said.....This one is mine." She shrieked.

"You heard Charlie." Shouted Ruby. "It's hers..... Leave it to her."

Charlie became the thing of flames she'd become on Jingdao Island, which now seemed a lifetime ago. She knew the people with her were friends who weren't to be harmed, but she had to keep forcing herself to remember that. The Nagala was running at her, the injury to its leg not slowing it down at all.

"Erm....It's yours Charlie." Said Kallina. "Anytime you like....Now would be nice."

Charlotte smiled at Kallina, or at least she hoped it was a smile. Her face was now nothing but a mass of flames. She ran to meet the Nagala, actually leaping to embrace it when she was close enough. She heard Ruby gasp, before she was totally lost in the moment. Charlie was nothing but the burning, a mass of white hot flames and fire. She embraced the Nagala and in doing so, she consumed it, right down to the tip of its tail. She'd fed on the creature in some way she didn't understand and for a few moments, not even a tiny part of her was human.

"Charlie ! She's naked.....Give me your jacket." She heard Ruby say.

For a second it felt strange to have a body again, something a coat could be wrapped round. There had been a similar feeling before, when she'd melted an entire car for Pablo. Not as intense then though, there had been nothing in the car to feed on.

"It's alright Ruby I'm fine.....Better than fine."

"I'm just glad you're on our side." Said Rory.

She smiled and his reaction to her smile told her she was human again, or at least mostly human. For a split second she hadn't been on anyone's side, there had just been a need to consume the Nagala, to feed. Sophie seemed to understand, but she always did see very deeply.

"So little of it left." Said Sophie. "Barely a pound or two of ashes."

"We can celebrate properly later, we need to get moving." Said Ruby.

Sophie offered her some of her spare clothing.

"You can dress on the move."

A sweet and very kind offer, if Sophie hadn't been the smallest out of all of them and Charlie, although not huge, had a few more curves. Graham the tech guy was her saviour, offering her a Queen T shirt, a pair of black jeans and even his spare trainers. Everything was a bit loose on her, but Charlie wasn't about to complain.

"There..... There it is, the sacred stone."

She heard Ruby shout in the distance, as she ran to catch up.

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Max wasn't that worried and there had been no point in hiding it from Monique. Around two in the morning and he was looking at the camp fire in the desert to the west of their prison. Monique had her face pushed up against a wide crack in the wall.

"They're closer than they were last night." She said.

"A little, but they're probably just passing through. Nothing to worry about my warrior woman."

She smiled, he'd been calling her his warrior woman every now and then, since she'd killed the small mammal predator that had invaded their home one night. Probably a type of Hyrax, though identifying the mangled remains had been impossible.

"If only we had weapons." She said.

"We don't.....They will more than likely be gone by tomorrow night."

"We're trapped in here Max..... Why not use the explosives ? There must be enough to blow a hole in the walls."

He'd been through it all with her before and Monique wasn't a coward, or stupid. She just didn't like feeling trapped, neither did he. It did feel like being in a mouse in a trap, waiting for the cat to turn up.

"If they get closer, we'll stop using the radio and keep to the lower room most of the time." He said.

"You're ignoring my questions..... Again."

"I'm an old dog, my warrior woman.... Too late to be a reconstructed man now."

She left the crack in the wall and hugged him.

"I think you're just fine as you are." She said. "I know we've been through this, but tell me again why we're safest where we are..... It makes me feel better."

He'd thought about Kallina's concern that a light might give them away, but they had no lights. The radio was only ever on low and anyway.... Who would bother to come looking for them ? That was worrying him, though he'd never mention that to Monique.

"Let's start with no one knowing where we are, no one has a clue." He said. "Then we can move onto how hard it would be to get to us inside our thick stone walls."

"We'll have problems basting our way out." She said.

"Exactly my warrior woman, exactly. Blasting our way out and making a run for it is just likely to get us killed. As you say we have no weapons. We stay put in here and stay quiet, very quiet."

"Like mice."

"Yes Monique....Like mice."

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"I think we're going to have to wade across this bit." Said Sophie.

Ruby put her fingers in the water and it was about the temperature she liked for her shower in the morning. The stone was there, just as it had been in the memory the Arbiters had shown her.

Glowing with a strong yellow light, as it had probably done for countless millennia. The city had gone, hardly a trace that any buildings had ever been there. A few pieces of broken stone were all that remained of Dian-Haz, the most beautiful of all their cities.

"Quite a few dead Nagala." Said Sarah. "I think they must have been washed down here by the flood of boiling water."

Rory was having all sorts of problems getting the lighting array across the waist high lake of hot water. A lot had been taken into account when designing the lights, but obviously not the possibility of flooding.

"We need a few people to help with the lights." She said.

Hers was still the voice of command; even Ishel's rogues came to help carry the heavy lights across the water. In truth Ruby doubted that they'd need the lights on the other side of the shroud, but she wasn't cruel enough to mention that to Rory. The lights were his thing and in all fairness, they had been essential.

"You said there was a city here once." Said Sarah.

"Yes, but that was a very long time ago, when all this was on the surface. So long ago that all trace of their wonderful city has gone."

"The continents themselves were different then." Added Ishel. "Their city would have been further south than it is now, a lot further south."

Ruby walked right up to the sacred stone and touched it with her right hand. Ishel did the same and the yellow glow increased. Everyone else had given them space, as they'd spread out around the top of the hill. Anna was even leaning over Tlal's shoulder and waving furiously.

"Once we open the gate it will stay open." Said Ruby. "Don't rush; you'll all be able to get through."

"It'll stay open....For better or worse." Ishel whispered. "We both have a pretty good idea of the nature of the curse we'll face inside the shroud."

"Would telling them help?" Asked Ruby.

Ishel just shook her head as they placed their hands on the sacred stone. For the first time in countless millennia, the world hidden inside the shroud had been opened.

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