

Ruby V : Machu Picchu

Chapter 20 – Machu Picchu

“Some thought temples on high mountains served the purpose of getting closer to God, or the Gods if you believed in more than one. Others believed that like castles on mountains, they were built to put height and gravity between you and potential enemies.”

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There was a quick way through the mountains to Machu Picchu, or a long way by heading south and coming in via Cusco. No one person came up with a plan, though Todd had said Ruby needed three or four days to heal. The ideas grew organically, though wanting to see Cusco came up several times. “It was the capital of the Inca Empire, we have to see Cusco.” Sophie had said.

Places on paper maps were found that were likely to have lodgings for a night. Some roads were written off as too likely to flood, while on the whole, main roads were to be avoided where possible. “At the end of the day.....We are still on holiday.” Lily had said.

Lily had joined in with the laughter and later claimed the comment had been intended as a joke. Spider knew better, he’d seen her expression when the laughter had begun. A couple of nights in local lodgings and a night in a decent hotel in Cusco. If all else failed a night in the bus wouldn’t kill anyone. Then, on the way back from Machu Picchu, they’d have a full week in Cusco.

“Best hotel we can find.....On me.” Ruby had muttered.

Her voice had been a little strange, but understandable. With a little extra help in healing from Sophie and Eugenie; Todd was telling everyone she’d be fine by the time they walked up to Machu Picchu. Baba Yaga’s ashes had been left in her preferred last resting place. Machu Picchu was somewhere so many people wanted to see, it was in the top five of Spider’s bucket list, the things to do before the grim reaper arrived. There seemed no good reason not to still go there.

“At Machu Picchu, we’ll undress and dance round a ritual fire.” Todd had said.

Weird things were known to happen on trips with Ruby Mason and Todd was keeping a straight face. It was only when Eugenie began to laugh, that Spider relaxed. He was older than most of them, if not all of them. If nudity was involved, he needed a few days to diet and prepare.

“Bastard, had me going there.” Said Spider.

“I don’t do public nudity when I’m sober, even for Ruby.” Said Sarah.

It wasn’t a long way from the nearest tourist facilities to Machu Picchu itself, but everything was at a height of eight thousand feet. Nothing compared to what Spider had been through in Afghanistan, but the terrain was unknown. There was also the chance that the world heritage site might still be officially closed to visitors. That would mean using lesser used pathways. Fun, but that would bring its own risks. There wasn’t now, or ever had been, an intention to obey any visitor ban. Spider’s back was still sore, but he was trying to catch up on lost sleep, when the helicopter appeared. It came in low, skimming over their bus and then climbing to avoid a group of trees.

“Anyone expecting these guys ?” Asked Lily.

“Me.” Said Ruby.

“Ruby is expecting them.” Added Sophie.

“I’ll get us clear of the trees.” Said Lily.

Lily was driving, after having a heated argument about it with Todd. Spider had intervened after it looked like a genuine fight might ensue. Lily took the bus about fifty yards along the road and onto a stony area that looked solid and dry. The helicopter landed not that far away, the rotors sending up a cloud of dead leaves. One man got out of the helicopter and walked towards the bus. He looked to be wearing an expensive trench coat over a dark coloured Brooks Brothers suit.

“He might as well have spy tattooed on his forehead.” Said Caleb.

Ruby muttered at Todd, who then looked around the bus.

“Spider and Sophie, you’re both needed with Ruby.” Said Todd.

Spider had no idea why he’d been selected, but that was often the case. Todd was staying on the bus it seemed, with just Sophie and himself going with Ruby. Spider helped her get down from the bus, though there was nothing frail or unsure about the way Ruby walked.

“Stay with me, Spider.” Ruby muttered. “I may need to lean on you.”

“No problem.”

Sophie hung back a little and she was about ten feet away, when they reached the man in the trench coat. Not that Sophie had to be close to know every word that was said. The pictures of a very dead Colonel had been printed by Sarah on Ellie’s colour printer. They were probably inside the thick brown envelope that Ruby handed to the man.

“Half eaten, but still recognisable.” Said Ruby. “His dog tag is in there, with the other items.”

“They are very pleased.” Said the man.

Ruby was given a thin envelope that could have held two pages at the very most. She seemed happy and put it in her pocket. A bank transfer maybe to one of her many bank accounts in other names ? Spider never resented Ruby’s wealth; it had bought them out of many difficult situations. In his experience, there were few problems that couldn’t be solved by an attaché case full of large value dollar bills, or Euros. It was unfair and grotesque, but it was also the way things worked in many countries and places around the globe.

“Have you picked up Liam ?” Asked Ruby.

“Yes, the police handed him over an hour ago.” Said the man.

“Be kind to him.....He is more sinned against than sinning.”

The man nodded and it seemed Mitch had reached the end of his adventure with the wunderkinds. Todd brought him from the bus, his wrists bound with a couple of cable ties. Mitch was smiling and obviously pleased to be going. Going where ? Spider thought the helicopter was probably local and hired by the CIA. Mitch was probably on his way to an interrogation centre somewhere in the USA. Mitch might turn up one day, as a CIA asset. Or he could just as easily end up dead in a ditch somewhere, if he was considered to be unreliable.

“Goodbye.....We must all promise to never do this again.” Said Mitch.

Mitch tripped and fell over. Ruby would never have done it, but Sophie ? She was smiling as Mitch was picked up by the helicopter pilot and placed in a seat. The man in the trench coat shook hands with Ruby and that was it. By the time Spider had helped Ruby back onto the bus, the helicopter was just a whirring noise somewhere to the east. Spider helped Ruby back to her seat, though she didn’t seem to be finished with him.

“Sit with me for a while, Spider.” Said Ruby. “I want to hear all about you and Sarah starting a family.”

“She told you ?” He asked.

“Of course she did.....She told everyone. Sarah is happy and excited about having children.”

“Just.....Just one child.” Said Spider.

“Oh, Spider.....There is never just one child.” Muttered Ruby. “I guarantee Sarah is already thinking about three.”

“Really ?” He asked.

“You’re such an innocent in many ways.” Said Ruby. “Good job Sarah has put her mark on you. Another woman might have eaten you alive.”

Spider had never thought of it like that, but now Ruby had mentioned it. Was Ruby putting her whammy on him, the famous smile ? If she was, she was.....He no longer worried about it.

“I do realise I’m lucky to have Sarah.” He said.

“So, as a family man you can’t go back to beating people up for money.” Said Ruby.

“Debt collection, Ruby.” He said. “It is legal and I’m good at it.”

“I’m sure you are.....I know people.” Said Ruby. “I’ll get a few of them to see you. As Sarah wants a family, we must find you a respectable job.”

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To Cal it was quite frustrating. The only person sure of where they were was Lily and she was down the front of the bus, driving it. And then there was Constanze, the cat who was probably once named after and owned by Mozart’s wife. As Constanze Mozart had died in eighteen forty two, that made the cat on her lap, at least a hundred and eighty years old. No matter how often Cal put the ancient feline in her carrier, Constanze let herself out. Cal had watched her do it, vanishing out of the carrier and appearing somewhere inside the bus. Did the others enjoy travelling with such an old and wise cat ? No, they constantly moaned about Constanze wandering about, wherever she pleased.

True, the ancient cat did tend to use anywhere in the bus as a toilet, but the bus had a fairly funky smell before Constanze had begun peeing in corners. Feeding and watering Constanze was no problem, but the cat seemed to view their bus as a litter tray on wheels. Being honest, Cal could see why she might have come to think that. The bus was grubby; the floor covered in litter and.....There was that rather funky smell.

“Oh.....What am I going to do with you ?” Cal muttered, as she stroked the old grey cat.

Sarah sat next to her. Good, another one of them come to moan about her inherited pet. Cal had learned to smile while they moaned, while not taking any of it in. She was going to buy another litter tray in Cuzco, certain that Constanze would ignore it and pee anywhere she liked.

“I haven’t come to complain.” Said Sarah.

“That’ll make a refreshing change.” Said Cal.

“As I see it, you can get Constanze to change her habits.....Good luck with that.” Said Sarah. “Or, you can change the attitude of those on the bus. I’m quite good at attitude adjustment. It will take a bit of shouting, but.....Would you like me to adjust the attitude of people on the bus ?”

“Oh, Sarah.....You’re an angel.....Yes please.” Said Cal.

“Here, let me hold Constanze.....We’re old friends.” Said Sarah.

Sarah didn’t have a tannoy to use or a megaphone; she didn’t need either of those. There was a natural deepness to her voice and a certain attitude.

“Everyone.....Please, shut up !” Yelled Sarah. “I need your attention.”

When everyone was looking at her, Sarah turned so that everyone could see the cat held in her arms.

“This is Constanze, who is close to two hundred years old.” Said Sarah. “In my opinion that makes her as much a wunderkind as anyone else in this bus. Being able to get out of her carrier, makes her cleverer than some. Do you all agree ?”

“Yes, we all love the little monster.” Said Lorenzo. “The smell though.....Something has to be done.”
“She was Kallina’s cat.” Shouted Todd. “The weather is warm for the time of year....Open more windows.”

“Thank you, Todd.” Said Sarah. “Constanze belonged to Kallina for years. The cat is one of us and has a right to be on this bus. Like all cats, she has her own view on the world and thinks of our grubby old bus as being part of the world she can pee in.....Put up with it, out of memory and love for Kallina. Don’t moan at Cal, or I will come and see you. You don’t want me coming to see you.....Agreed ?”

“Yeah.....Sorry, Cal.” Said Lorenzo.

“I just hope we don’t have to sleep on the bus.” Said Eugenie.

“You won’t have to.” Said Thio. “I know Paucara and we’ll be driving through there tonight. There are several decent places to stay.”

“Yay for Paucara.” Said Sophie.

Sarah gave her Constanze back, who ended up on Cal’s lap, purring. With luck, no one was going to moan about her habits again.

“Two hundred years old, Constanze.” Cal muttered. “The things you must have seen.”

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Unless he was going out with members of the dealing floor, Abe tended to eat lunch alone. A burger place usually, or a cheap diner near the tube station. He was being paid, though a trainee’s wage didn’t run to a fancy lunch every day. He was biting into a burger, fingers covered in grease, when a face he knew was crossing Bishopsgate. A pretty face, though one he thought was currently in Paris, running various enterprises. He waved and received a smile back, as Charlotte walked across the pavement towards the burger place. Abe wiped his fingers on a couple of tissues. He knew Charlie, of course he did. They seemed to have travelled across half the globe with the other wunderkinds, on a barely airworthy Antonov cargo plane. That plane had become their home for months.

“Charlotte, I thought you lived in Paris full time.” Said Abe.

“I do, just here for a day.....Mainly to see Penny.” Said Charlie. “Well.....Are you going to get me a coffee ?”

“Yes.....Yes, of course I will. Are you hungry ?” He asked.

“I’m always hungry, what do you recommend ?”

“The cheeseburgers here are alright, with a box of fries.” Said Abe.

“Sounds perfect.”

Was she flirting with him ? There was definitely a bit of a twinkle in her eyes. He’d heard Charlie could be changeable, Sophie’s word for a little crazy. She was pretty and intelligent though and the only girl he’d had lunch with in.....It had to be several weeks.

“Cheeseburger and fries coming up.” He said.

“And a frothy coffee.” Charlie reminded him.

A lot of people there for a quick lunch, but they managed to find two stools along the counter top in the window. Charlie didn’t pick at her food and didn’t seem to mind getting greasy fingers. She was attentive, listening to him and asking questions about how his new job was going. It did cross his mind that Charlie might be using her gifts to influence him. Why would she bother though ? He was hardly a major player in the group.

“I’m in London tonight and I know I’ll be bored.” Said Charlie. “Promise you’ll join me for dinner at my hotel.....Please don’t say no. If I ask Penny she’ll talk about EU banking regulations for the entire evening. Save me from that, Abe.”

Gorgeous and best of all, no constant worry about what he said. Charlie knew he was one of the wunderkinds and he'd seen her in action. All that fire.....Being honest, Charlotte scared him a little. He was pleased when she scribbled her hotel details on a piece of burger box.

"Here.....Now you have to turn up." Said Charlie.

"Of course I'll turn up.....EU banking regulations.....A fate worse than death." He said.

They were laughing and he'd agreed to be there at seven thirty that night. When Charlie put her hand on his, it seemed the most natural thing in the world. Was the dinner meant as a date ?

"We can talk tonight, but so you know.....I want to discuss our future, all our futures." Said Charlie.

It sounded like something on social media and for one awful moment, he was worried that Charlie was going to ask if he'd ever considered investing in some kind of crypto currency.

"Our futures.....What do you mean ?" He asked.

"How much are they paying you ?"

"I do alright and I'm learning."

"Where are you living, Abe ? Some small place George wouldn't keep his dog in ?" Asked Charlie.

She was making him angry; the conversation seemed to have moved onto him and his life as a trainee dealer.

"I'm happy and once I get a little more experience, I'll start earning more." Said Abe. "Nothing worth doing was ever achieved overnight. There is no instant success button, Charlie. You should know that."

Charlie squeezed his hand and looked genuinely concerned.

"Sorry, I didn't want to upset you." Said Charlie. "I'm talking to most of the wunderkinds over the next few weeks. We should be much more active in global affairs. There isn't one existing billionaire with our special gifts. Imagine what we could accomplish."

"I can't see Ruby agreeing to us coming out of the shadows." Said Abe.

"Some will side with Ruby, while some will agree with me."

"I'm not keen on being on anyone's side." Said Abe.

"But you will have to pick a side, Abshir Duale.....Or one will be picked for you." Said Charlie.

"Charlie.....You make it sound like a war."

There was a look on her face, as Charlie chewed at her burger. Born in Derby in Britain, in nineteen twenty, tall, thin and a natural blonde. Abe remembered being given a broad brush stroke Bio on all the wunderkinds by Kallina. There was something else there now though, lurking inside Charlotte. The creature of flames and burning hid inside Charlie and for a second or so, Abe had caught a glimpse of it.

"Ruby and I are like sisters." Said Charlie. "And sometimes.....Sisters fight. I'll explain everything tonight. Are we still on for dinner ?"

"Yes, I'll be there."

Charlie finished her burger and actually kissed him on the cheek before leaving. Any other young woman and Abe would have been certain that dinner was a date, part of the ritualised foreplay he'd never been that good at. With Charlotte though.....The part about having a side picked for him, had sounded like a threat.

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Paucara was a larger and much nicer town than Sophie had expected. Hotels with free protected parking, even some bed and breakfast places that advertised as being gay friendly. Only a population of around two thousand, but like so many places in Peru, the town had realised the benefits of

encouraging a wide variety of hotels and eating places. Of course, the arguments began before they were even out of the bus.

"I want a traditional Peruvian meal tonight." Said Sarah.

"Been there, done that.....There must be a Chinese food restaurant." Said Eugenie.

"I agree with her." Said Lorenzo.

"You always do." Said Thio.

As soon as Ruby spoke, everyone listened. Sophie began to remember how many arguments Ruby had calmed down, simply by being calm herself. There was still a huskiness to Ruby's voice, but talking no longer seemed to leave her in pain.

"The food is almost immaterial. We need somewhere quiet and large." Said Ruby. "I have an announcement to make about where we're likely to visit after Cusco. Ideally I'd like us all around the same restaurant table."

"I'll make a few phone calls." Said Lily.

"Where are we going after Cusco?" Asked Sarah.

"Maybe.....Maybe going." Said Ruby. "We'll talk about it later, while we eat."

Todd decided on the bed and breakfast, simply by walking in and asking if they had room for everyone on the bus. They did, just about, though one or two would need to sleep on a mattress on the floor. Thio seemed to like the place and as a local, his opinion mattered. Everyone agreed that their lodgings for the night were far better than a night in their grubby bus.

"Found somewhere." Said Lily. "The food sounds sort of Tex-Mex. Importantly, they said it's a quiet night and they'll drag two large tables together for us."

"I quite like Tex-Mex." Said Spider.

"I'm so hungry, I'll eat anything." Said Todd.

The restaurant was a single storey building at the back of town. It was fairly empty, which was good as it wasn't that large. Once corner had been set up for them, with tables pushed together and the tables decorated with flowers. There were even three or four candles twinkling among the flowers.

"Hmmmmm, admission time." Said Lily. "I might have given them the idea it was Ruby's birthday."

"See.....All that MI6 training does come in useful." Muttered Sophie.

Sarah spoke to the guy who seemed to run the place and aided by Thio, they found out that he was more than happy to be paid cash, in American dollars. He was also willing to close the doors a little early, though 'Miss Ruby' and her friends could drink all night if they wanted to. The food when it came wasn't brilliant, though as Spider said.

"It'll keep body and soul together."

One dish was chicken meat in a chocolate sauce, which sounded dreadful, though Sophie quite liked it. Not her idea of Tex-Mex, but she thought it probably depended on where you were in the world. Vegetarian options seemed to be the meat options with the meat removed and a few extra vegetables added.

"The beer is nice and cold.....I'll forgive a lot of a place with nice cold beer." Said Caleb.

Ruby looked a little tired and maybe a little drunk; by the time she tapped a spoon on an empty wine glass. No need to stand up, she had everyone's attention.

"Well.....I hope you're all enjoying our vacation?" Asked Ruby.

"Vacation.....I thought I'd accidentally joined the SAS selection process." Said Spider.

"Did you get accepted, Spider?" Asked Sophie.

Lots of laughter and for people recently under attack by a religious cult, everyone seemed remarkably laid back. Not so laid back that they'd take root, but cool about it. The birthday cake

arrived before Ruby had a chance to continue. Remarkably good, with lots of icing....They were all given a slice on a paper plate.

"Wow, this is worth a decent tip." Said Todd.

"Better than chicken and chocolate." Said Sarah.

Ruby obviously liked the birthday cake, despite her real birthday being about two months ago. She cleared her plate before coming to the point of getting them all around the table.

"I know Sophie has been muttering about the Nazca Lines." Said Ruby. "I doubt if anyone in Peru hasn't heard her complaining about my refusal to go there."

"Only Peru ? I think they know in Colombia and Brazil." Said Spider.

"And Ecuador." Added Eugenie.

Sophie didn't like being the centre of attention, unless it was all unsolicited praise. Being the target of a joke.....It worried her that it was true and totally deserved.

"Sorry.....I suppose I did overdo it a bit." Said Sophie. "It's just that I think we're missing something about Nazca, something important. Kallina went there and something terrified her. She never went back."

Ruby was staring at her, yet there was more sadness there than anger. For once, Sophie wished Ruby's mind was as open to her, as were most of the other minds around the table.

"After Cusco I am willing to go to Nazca." Said Ruby. "I have to admit that I have Kallina's diary for her trip there and it's not a pleasant read. Pages are ripped out, whole paragraphs scribbled over with marker pen. Hard to be sure what scared her....There is one recurring idea though, something she discovered deep in the ground. She called it a way home."

"A way home for who ?" Asked Eugenie.

"Maybe us, the last of the descendants of the people of the Karakum." Said Ruby. "To be honest though, I always thought we were home. It's a mystery and if I read her diary correctly, solving the mystery will be dangerous."

"You should have told me about it." Snapped Sophie.

"Perhaps, though knowing you.....You'd have gone running off to Nazca with a pick and shovel in your hands. Caleb following in your wake of course." Said Ruby.

At that moment Sophie knew that Ruby had seen through all her pretence. Sophie never had intended to give up on going to Nazca and Ruby had known it.

"But to be clear.....You're happy to go there now ?" Asked Sophie.

"Not happy.....Willing to go. There is a huge difference."

Everyone began asking Ruby questions, while Ruby was still giving her the stink eye. Lily wanted to know the logistics of digging anywhere near the Nazca lines. Spider as always, wanted an idea about potential enemies and the weapons he might need. Sophie just kept looking at Ruby and waiting for a gap in all the questions. Eventually she held her hand up to stop Spider from talking.

"The diary, Ruby.....Does it say where to dig ?" Asked Sophie.

"Yes it does.....It mentions a way home several times and I get the impression.....It may not mean it in the way we think. We will need to be very careful."

"Wow, do we get a vote on going, or not going ?" Asked Lorenzo.

"No, we're not a democracy." Said Ruby. "After a week in Cusco, we're going to Nazca."

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By the time Ruby was walking along Avenue Tullumayo in Cusco, her face had healed to the point where it had ceased throbbing. The mirror was still showing her a spider's web of scars, but they were beginning to fade. It was a cold morning, so wearing a scarf around her face didn't look out of

place. Their hotel was just around the corner and being honest, the rooms were a little compact and bijou.....A little smaller than they'd have liked. Cusco was a small city with a lot of history, which meant a hell of a lot of tourists. The hotel was only for one night. When they returned for a week, Lily had promised to do far more research. Something four stars and rooms where you could at least swing a cat around.

Everyone else had hurtled off to the various museums and galleries, but Todd and her had a closer objective. An old Inca temple within easy strolling distance. It was going to be a genuine vacation day, with a lot of easy walks and plenty of coffee with nibbles. For some reason Cal had joined them, which gave Todd a chance to be tour guide for the day.

"We're going to see Qorikancha." Said Todd. "An Inca temple which once had walls and floors covered in pure gold."

"Wow, can I take pictures?" Asked Cal.

Todd looked at the free tourist map the hotel had in a rack near the reception desk. Ruby viewed the walk to Qorikancha as exercise, a chance to stretch her legs. It might be wonderful, or it might be just a ruin. Ruby didn't really care which.

"Hmmm, it doesn't say." Said Todd.

"Assume it's fine until someone yells at us." Said Ruby.

At one time Todd would have sighed at her casual disregard for rules, but she was obviously having an effect on him. He gave her a grin that was well on the way to becoming a smirk.

"Just turn the flash off, Cal." Said Todd.

It was a beautiful day in Cusco, perfect to enjoy narrow streets full of stores with colourful signs outside. Plenty of places for their coffee and nibbles after visiting the ancient Inca temple. Quite a bit of construction work going on, which wasn't helping the traffic flow.

"I'm glad we decided to walk." Said Todd. "The traffic looks about two cars away from gridlock."

"Cool, but sunny.....Perfect tourist weather." Said Cal.

From a little distance Qorikancha looked imposing; yes that was definitely the word. Imposing and grand, though Ruby would never have called it beautiful. As with some people, the beauty was on the inside. According to the tourist map, there was a wonderful central square behind the brown outer walls. The walls might no longer be covered in gold, but there was a feel about the place.

"Oh, so imposing.....I know I'm going to like Qorikancha." Said Ruby.

The entrance was behind a fence, on a narrow road. Yellow lines and a hill over to the left. The face Ruby knew so well was where the gate opened in the fence. Her eyes right next to a sign giving the price of admission to Qorikancha temple. A hint of a smile, it was difficult to be certain given the distance. A hand went up and waved and Ruby waved back.

"Why is she here? Did you call her, Todd?"

"Who?"

"Her, Charlotte....." Said Ruby, pointing. "She's right there, just inside the entrance."

"I see, it could be Charlie." Said Todd.

"It is her; I can feel her mind now." Said Ruby.

Charlotte vanished, literally there one moment and gone the next. Ruby was glad the other two were there; they must have seen it happen. Otherwise she might have blamed the recent injuries to her face and head.

"Like Constanze.....Vanished, as if by some kind of magic." Said Cal.

"Have you two been fighting recently?" Asked Todd.

"We're always fighting, though no worse than usual." Said Ruby.

Verbal fighting, verbal arguments, verbal yelling at one another like banshees. Always verbal, because anything else might leave them both dead. Ruby likened any actual violence as being like World War Three. Very nasty and over very quickly. Unless Charlie was crazy, she had to understand that too.

“Do you want to go inside Qorikancha ?” Asked Todd. “We could go for a coffee or something.”

“Oh, we have to see it now.....Please.” Said Cal.

“Cal is right and we’re here.....Get the tickets, Todd. I’m not letting Charlie spoil our day out. Not that I understand why she’s behaving like Constanze.”

“Where is your teleporting cat, Cal ?” Asked Todd.

“In my room at the hotel, I gave the maid a huge tip to ignore her.” Said Cal. “Given her ability to escape from anywhere, I can’t guarantee she won’t join us later.”

Todd went to queue up for tickets. There was a warning on the tourist map to book in advance, but they’d been on the road the previous day. It looked like poor Todd was in for a long wait. Ruby sat on a large stone that had probably once been part of the Inca temple. Cal sat next to her.

“If you suddenly have a Cat, we can say she’s your emotional support pet.” Said Ruby. “If that fails I can offer them money to look the other way.”

“Constanze often feels like my support cat.” Said Cal. “What are you going to do about Charlotte ?”

“When we get back to the hotel, I’ll make a few calls.” Said Ruby. “After that.....We shall see dear Cal, we shall see.”

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Eugenie had seen pictures of Machu Picchu, though like pop concerts, you really had to be there. A long drive from their previous night’s lodgings, though there were hostels nearby and a couple of bed & breakfast places. The world heritage site had been reopened, so there’d been no need to sneak in under the fence. A steep climb up from where they’d left the bus. Eugenie had felt guilty about moaning about the steep gradient, when she’d seen some quite frail and vulnerable people making the climb. Machu Picchu wasn’t exactly like a pilgrimage to Lourdes or Fatima, but it had to be on a lot of peoples’ bucket lists. They had a stowaway; Cal had Constanze held in her arms.

“So, our magical cat decided to join us.” Said Eugenie.

“She was Kallina’s cat.” Said Cal. “I’m not surprised she invited herself along. Heavy though, I might put her on a diet.”

“If your arms give out, I’ll gladly carry her.” Said Eugenie. “Super wunderkind strength and all that.”

“I will definitely keep you to that on the way down.” Said Cal.

There was an entry fee, though no one had bothered her for a ticket. Either Lily had taken care of that in advance, or Ruby had put the whammy on the staff. They were already high up in the mountains, probably eight thousand feet or so. Some thought temples on high mountains served the purpose of getting closer to God, or the Gods if you believed in more than one. Others believed that like castles on mountains, they were built to put height and gravity between you and potential enemies.

“There.....I want to reach there.” Said Ruby, pointing.

Still high above them and at the top of a terrifying set of exposed steps cut into the rock. Ruby seemed to be pointing at a grass lawn, next to building with no roof.

“It’s a long way, after an already steep climb.” Said Spider.

“Yes, but it is important.” Said Ruby.

“Breaking the rules of course, but when do we ever worry about rules.” Said Todd. “If the weather turns we can always spend the night up there. Not that I’m recommending it.”

“Oh come on.....It'll be fun.” Said Lol. “Something to tell the grandchildren about over a Christmas dinner when we're old and grey.”

“He's right.....Come on, one foot in front of the other.” Said Sarah.

“We'll be thrown out; the stairs are out of bounds.” Said Thio.

“Trust me, Thio.....No one is throwing us out of anywhere today.” Said Ruby.

Eugenie shared the job of carrying a heavy cat, up to what felt like the top of the world. There'd be no coming back down that night; it was dusk by the time the last of them had reached the area of grass. It looked larger close up, more the size of a football pitch. The ruined building would give some shelter from the wind, though Eugenie was already thinking of ways her gifts might keep them all warm until morning.

“Rest now.....I have a ritual to perform that's best done after darkness falls.” Said Ruby.

“We talked about this, you're still unwell.” Said Sophie.

Usually Eugenie was content with knowing only what Ruby chose to tell her. She had a life with Lorenzo now and a home in Italy. Truthfully, she'd have been happy to have heard about the trip to Peru after it had happened. Look at Sarah's pictures in a pub on a winter's night and make all the right noises. She hadn't even been invited, until Ruby needed someone to watch her back. No more being given crumbs of information, she deserved to know what Ruby was planning.

“What is this ritual ?” Asked Eugenie. “And Sophie is right; you're still too damaged to attempt anything risky.”

“Come.....We need privacy.” Said Ruby.

The far end of the grassy area was unsheltered and the wind had an icy blast. Eugenie noticed that even the ever present Llamas were avoiding that part of Machu Picchu. Just one standing stone seemed to be challenging the elements to do their worst. Ruby took them to where it would shield them from some of the wind.

“Charlotte seems to be making her move.” Said Ruby. “She'll have heard I was wounded and even had the nerve to come and look me over in Cusco.”

“You've always argued, but I'm sure Charlie loves you like a sister.” Said Eugenie.

“And sometimes sisters fight.....She used that line on Abe.” Said Ruby. “I've been making calls and nearly every wunderkind has been approached by Charlotte. Lau won't take my calls, so I'm assuming he's supporting her. Poor Lau, he has always been so easily led.”

“There are more loyal to you than support Charlie.” Said Sophie. “If she wants a war, she can have one.”

“Then what.....A very quick and deadly battle they'll see from the international space station ? Most of us will die and nothing will be achieved.” Said Ruby. “I have to face Charlie and I need to do it alone.”

“But.....You're still not healed.” Said Cal.

That girl, she could have sneaked up on a ninja. Cal was the future though, in many ways. A new start for the undying essence of Baba Yaga. She too probably had a right to know everything. Ruby smiled at Cal and beckoned her closer.

“I might surprise you yet, Cal.” Said Ruby. “I intend to call on an Inca deity, without using a word from any ancient books. No words of any kind, to call on Qalalu Karwancho, the god of fire. Not a good god, though most with understanding realise power is power and only the use it's put to really matters.”

“Stop teasing her, there must be a ritual involved.” Said Sophie.

“There was a statue of the fire god in Lima.” Said Spider. “Human features with a lot of canine parts.”

Spider now, with Sarah behind him. Soon everyone would be with them, trying to shelter behind a single standing stone.

“I seem to remember Qalalu Karwancho was called the devourer of children.” Said Sarah.

The wind picked up, as if her words had been overheard.

“Nonsense, all nonsense.” Said Ruby. “Qalalu Karwancho the god of fire, was here long before the Incas decided to give the deity a name. No gender or solid form, the god of fire was on this planet right from the beginning. A planet of fire then, the perfect place for such a deity. All I need to summon such a god, is this field, the stone we’re all using as shelter from the wind....and.....Me, the last part of the puzzle escaped me for a while.....It’s me.”

“Are you going to die ?” Asked Cal.

“No, or at least I hope not.....You’ll all need to go back with the others when I’m read.” Said Ruby.

“What others, they’re all heading this way.” Said Spider.

Eugenie looked and it was like the chain of kids following teacher on a school outing. Thio was at the back, trying to pull his jacket tighter against the biting wind.

“Just remember what the god of fire looks like.” Said Eugenie. “Then you can tell us once it’s all over.”

“I’ll do my best, but formless gods.....Tend to be formless.” Said Ruby.

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