

Ruby 3

Chapter 25 – The Curse

“Mukami Kibore, better known to everyone as Doc, quite liked the hospital waiting room. There was a machine that dispensed a decent cup of coffee and another full of assorted packets of junk food. Add on the comfortable chairs and it was the snuggest place he’d been in for a while.”

Δ

Eugenie hadn’t known where Pablo had been waiting for the all clear, the message that it was safe to come to Malou’s hotel. Not that she was worried about being captured, the information obtained by unpleasant persuasion. It was simply that her mind had been full of the Gérard Villand business and preventing George from giving her help that wasn’t sought or needed. She hadn’t even been aware of his presence in the hotel, until Virna had called up from the reception desk.

“I have someone checking in, a Mr Joshua Harris. He says you’re expecting him.”

Poor Pablo, he probably didn’t know Charlotte was still in Africa. It had to be Pablo of course, using one of a dozen false identities he travelled under.

“Thank you Virna, I’ll be right down.”

Going anywhere with a small child was never instant or spontaneous. It had bothered Eugenie in the beginning, the list of things to be remembered, the pieces of what looked like lab equipment, which Seong needed. There had been times when it felt like the baby needed a mobile chem lab to go everywhere with her. Then one morning it had all just become part of Eugenie’s routine and it had ceased to bother her. Not that much was needed to meet Pablo in reception, but she still put the bag containing the essential over her shoulder.

“Be good.” She muttered at a smiling Seong.

Bag over shoulder, child in carry cot, Eugenie left her room and used the elevator to get down to reception. No Pablo at the desk, he’d moved himself to a table near the window. It was nice to see him, even if he was one of the cartel people who seemed intent on claiming Charlie as theirs. She sat next to him and hoped Seong was her usual adorable and above all, quiet self.

“Ahhh Joshua.....You look just like my friend Pablo.” She said.

“Yes, alright.....I know the watchers have gone, but.....Just playing it safe.”

“I’m assuming you’re here to see Charlie ? She’s still in Africa, Uganda to be precise.”

She could see his brow furrow at the mention of Charlie not being there, he had it bad.

“I wasn’t sure.” He said. “My usual source of information is Olga, but she’s away on a job right now, for George Polandrous of all people. Any idea when Charlotte will be back ?”

“Ruby asked for her to go to Uganda, to help with the final push, Charlie’s words, not mine.

Whatever they’re doing, I got the impression it’s almost over. Would you like my advice ? It is free and I won’t sulk if you do the exact opposite.”

“Yes please, I’d appreciate it.”

“Get unpacked and enjoy the hotel, it really is excellent. Charlie will probably be back in a few days. If she isn’t I’ll make a few calls and track her down.”

“Thank you.....Erm.... Do you fancy company for dinner tonight. Not that I’m.....You know, you’re one of the few people I know in Paris.”

Poor guy, he was actually going a bit red and sweaty. Eugenie was tempted to tease him, but to be honest, she quite fancied a bit of company that didn't need regular feeds and a nappy change. "Thank you, I'd love to join you for dinner." She said.

~ ~

For a long time there had been no intention to bring everyone through the shroud. Ruby had always intended to bring the wunderkinds with her and Ishel's rogues, but the others, the muggles as she still sometimes referred to them? They were to have been left to make their way back to Nairobi. A decent hotel and they could all catch up on sleep until it was all over. Crossing the border into Uganda had changed all that. There was Kampala of course, but Ruby didn't need her gifts to know that her group wanted to stay together. She might be about to get some of her friends killed, but everyone who'd come down the two mile long tunnel, was going through the shroud with her. "Follow us through." She yelled. "Don't wander off when we get to the other side." She really hadn't meant to single out Sarah, but there was eye contact as she said it. Poor Sarah would never be the same if Spider died, nor would she when she thought about it. From would be burglar to guard and very special friend, Spider had become someone she thought the world of. And he'd done it without really trying.

"I think.....It's open." Said Ishel. "Though as this is the only time we've done it, I can't be sure." "It's open, I can feel the minds of the Arbiters." Said Ruby.

The sacred stone was glowing yellow, with a rainbow effect at its centre. Ruby held her breath, as she stepped into the rippling rainbow of colours. For a second nothing seemed to happen, but she hadn't collided with solid rock. A few more steps and she was stood on a hilltop, a few steps more and the world beyond the shroud was stretched out below her. She turned and saw the others emerge from the sacred stone at that end. It wasn't glowing, but they were coming out of it, the way a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat.

"I thought.....So little is left in one piece." Said Ishel. "I came expecting to see a beautiful city."

"It has been a long time and there are so few of them left." Said Ruby. "And there is.... The Curse."

Heranza Methun, the female Arbiter, had talked about a city of beauty. Perhaps they'd become delusional with the passing of so much time? There was a city beside a road, but it looked as though barely a single wall was still intact. There was a tower in the far distance, which still looked impressive, as the sunlight was reflected off its metal roof.

"At least two gates are still standing on the outer wall." Said Ishel. "Someone is still attempting to keep the city useable."

"It's a ruin, I wouldn't like to live there." Said Sophie.

"I was hoping to find so many answers here." Muttered Ruby.

"They might have gone underground into basements and cellars." Said Charlotte. "There might even be catacombs below the ruins."

They were all waiting, no one seemed to be taking an unofficial food break. Ruby had long since stopped counting the people who were relying on her, but Rory knew. There was no roll call, but he always knew if they needed to look for someone, or wait for people to catch up.

"Did everyone get through alright Rory?" She asked.

"Everyone is here."

"It looks to be about midday here." She shouted. "We need to find a safe place to sleep in the ruined city, before nightfall. Keep your eyes open for stairways leading down, or buildings that look reasonably secure."

They followed her as she made her way down the hill. There was a pathway of sorts, though it might have been created by the local wildlife. No birds in the sky, but there were noises coming from a nearby wood. Kallina seemed to have the same thoughts as her.

"It's nice to explore a new world Ruby." She said. "I just wish we knew what might be lurking in the undergrowth, wondering if we're its next meal."

"I think the Nagala were something even the Arbiters regretted." Said Ruby. "With luck we won't meet anything like them. Can you feel anything Kallina ? I can't sense Nazili or Heranza. The only thing I can feel in the ruins is that tower in the distance."

"I can sense it too.....Nothing specific, like a signpost saying come here."

"We won't get there today." Said Ruby. "Of all the things I imagined, a long trudge to find shelter for the night, wasn't one of them."

~ ~

"They're here Max." Whispered Monique. "Their campfires are right outside."

He had tried to get her to stay in the relative safety of the lowest parts of their prison, but it was impossible. She'd waited until he was asleep, to creep upstairs. There she'd been, peering through the crack in the wall that faced just about due north. Max ran his hand through her hair and felt her lean towards him. He kissed her neck in the almost total darkness.

"A nomadic tribe passing through, you'll see." He said. "By morning they'll be on their way."

"I'm not a child Max, don't treat me like one."

She was right, they both knew the campfires had been moving closer each night. They had camels, he recognised the smell of burning camel dung being used on their fires. Probably a large group, he'd heard the occasional phrase shouted in Arabic. They were so close now that he heard someone laugh.

"We have no weapons, so we hide my dear." He said. "Simple as that."

"There are the explosives....."

"As a last resort to take as many of the bastards with us as we can." He whispered.

She was tougher these days, far tougher than he gave her credit for. No trembling skin under his hands, she continued to stare at the campfires. He kissed the back of her neck and wondered how long they had left to live. A few hours, maybe a day or two ? They might have come to capture them, maybe hired by one of his many enemies. That was an awful thought and he was determined to save Monique from such a fate. If the unknown enemy breached the walls, he'd made up his mind to snap her neck.

"There are so many of them out there." Said Monique. "I heard a woman's voice....They brought their women with them Max."

To him it seemed natural, they were probably a nomadic group. Where their headman led, they all followed. Monique seemed shocked though, by the thought that women were in the group, female fighters. When Max heard scraping sounds from outside, he held her hand and gently pulled.

"They're about to try something, we should go downstairs."

"Try what ?"

"I have no idea, but we need to get deeper.....Come on."

She was reluctant, but she came with him. They both sat on the bed in the lowest level of the old ruins. It had been where he'd once slept and there were no gaps in the walls. No light at all down there, no clue whether it was night or day outside.

"What will they do with us ?" She asked.

"Nothing, the walls are thick, they'll never get in."

“But if they do get in.....”

“We’ll set off the explosives.”

“Alright.” She said.

The sound of gunfire outside was unexpected. Automatic weapons, probably assault rifles. Max was sure he recognised the bark of AK47s, firing long bursts. As he heard the first muffled explosion, he held Monique, intending to kill her if the walls were breached.

“Who are they firing at ?”

“I’ve no idea.” He replied.

He hadn’t, everything seemed crazy. More explosions, which sounded more like antipersonnel weapons, rather than anyone trying to blow a hole in the walls of their prison. Quite a few different types of assault rifles, it sounded like troops armed with AR15s, fighting local fighters with Kalashnikovs. No one appeared to be trying to conserve ammunition. Long burst of fire, a firefight that showed no sign of ending. Max felt Monique move, as she tried to get upstairs.

“No ! We stay here until whatever is happening..... Stops happening.” He snapped.

She was quivering now, probably out of anger and frustration, rather than fear. At least she wasn’t trying to fight her way out of his grip. There was an enormous explosion that made the floor vibrate for a second or two. A massive blast that left his ears ringing, though once again it didn’t sound like anyone trying to get at them. The explosion seemed to be a little distance away, maybe at the camp they’d been watching.

“I hope our side wins.” He muttered. “If there is an our side out there.”

Of course it might well be two warring tribes, fighting to see who got them. Max was sure Monique didn’t need to hear that scenario, even if she might already be thinking it.

“So many people must be dying out there.” She said.

“Just so long as it’s not us.”

It seemed to take another half an hour for the steady chatter of automatic weapons to cease. Even then there was the occasional shot that sounded some distance away. Sadly the wrong side appeared to have won, the chipping noise against the walls began again. After the chipping came the sound of drilling.

“They’re placing charges in the walls.” He said.

There was nothing more to say. They held each other like scared children as the drilling went right along one wall of their prison. Kallina would be able to take care of the attackers on her own, as could Charlotte. The only problem was not having any way to contact either of them.

“Just dumping us here Max.....It’s her fault, that bitch Charlotte.”

The explosion when it came was a blur of flames, smoke and a sound that left him deaf for a few seconds. After the smoke came the cool fresh breeze, the first he’d ever felt in the prison. People were in the room above them, he could hear the sound of boots on a stone floor. Eventually a man’s voice came down the short passageway that led to the higher rooms.

“Max Krause.....Monique Ostby. I’ve been sent to rescue you, please show yourselves.”

Easy enough to throw a few grenades down if whoever it was wanted to kill them, and he seemed very polite if he was an assassin. Still.... Max tried to cover Monique with his body, as he ignored whoever it was.

“Please Max, I have wounded who need bringing inside to treat. I can’t do that without securing the building. I am here to transport you to Aden. Please show yourselves.”

“How did you get here ?” Asked Max.

“Helicopters Max.....There were three, now we have two. Please Max....I have quite a few men who are seriously injured, quite a few dead too.”

Max was almost on his feet, just a few more questions.

“Who sent you ?”

“I was hired by an agent, a KC Lacayo. I met the client, a fierce looking Russian woman called Olga. Not the sort of woman you mess about. She gave me a message for you, if you’re interested ?”

“What was it ?”

“She said you’re to stop being an arse, it’s time you went back to work.”

“We’re coming up.”

He helped Monique to her feet and chuckled as she insisted on rubbing most of the dust off her clothing and out of her hair.

“Is it going to be alright ?” She asked.

“Yes, they’re friendly forces.”

~

~

Sarah had survived the attack by the Nagala and learned from the experience. When she needed to pee in the middle of the night, she woke up Sophie to go with her. There had been a little moaning, until Sophie admitted she wanted to go too, but had been too lazy to get out from under her blanket.

“Sorry, I heard you muttering. I’ll come with you.” Said Tlal.

Of course Anna needed to empty her bladder too and assured them her one good eye could now see quite clearly again. Nari heard a group were heading out to pee and latched herself onto them. By the time they were ready to leave, there were at least seven of them, with Todd carrying an assault rifle.

“We should have announced it by loud hailer.” Said Sophie.

Sophie still needed to work on her sarcasm a little, but everyone understood that one. Ishel had discovered the reasonably secure cellar, just as it looked like they might have to sleep in the open. By the time Rory had installed the lighting arrays, it was a real home from home. A large single underground room, where everyone could get a space to sleep on the grubby floor. Being a home from home had ceased once the lights had gone off. Sarah hadn’t slept that well, if at all. Every sound was a monster coming for her; every movement in the darkness was another Nagala. To her at least, getting together in a group to pee meant security in numbers.

“Where are you all going ?” Asked Ruby.

“Sarah needs to pee and we’re going to keep her company.” Said Todd.

“Good idea, I’ll come too.” Said Charlie.

By the time they were up the stairs and into their first night inside the shroud, Sarah thought that everyone was with her, or at least it felt that way. Quiet talking that sounded so normal during the day, seemed to echo off the ruined buildings.

“Shouldn’t we be a bit..... Quieter ?” She asked.

“Sarah’s right, keep it down to a dull roar guys.” Said Ruby.

Not everyone had a flashlight, though it did feel more like they were the audience at a stadium rock concert, rather than sneaking around an unknown world. They split up into groups among a few remnants of old stone walls. Todd stood guard and then Sarah used her handgun to guard him. She hoped no one had a bladder problem, as the whole business wasn’t something she wanted to do more than once a night.

"Oh, the zipper has stuck on my jeans." Muttered Sophie. "Well..... It can stay like that until we get back to the cellar."

They found the two creatures sitting on the ground by accident. Charlie had found them, by almost falling over them. Human looking, but with a lot of physical characteristics that were definitely not human.

"I didn't sense they were there." Said Charlie. "That's impossible, no one can hide from me, no one."

"It's the Arbiters." Said Ruby. "Stop shining your flashlights in their faces."

Sat quite still the Arbiters looked more like Ishel's rogues than humans, but the differences were even more extreme. Their heads were more elongated and even sitting on the ground, they looked taller. There was still the disquieting movement of bits of their body under their robes, where no human had body parts to move. There they sat, looking in the direction of the cellar.

"We couldn't be sure if you were infected yet." Said the female.

"You were heading towards the curse." Said the male. "It calls you...I know, it calls to us too. If you're not infected yet, you will be...None are immune. There's hope though Ruby Mason, if you're strong enough."

"You can't sit here all night." Said Ruby. "We've made the cellar quite comfortable. Come with us."

Stood up the Arbiters looked to be a good eight feet tall. Muscles too, once their cloaks were wrapped around them to keep out the cold.

"We'll come with you, but you'll need to watch everyone Ruby." Said the female. "The anger will start with something that seems trivial. But..... You have weapons that can kill so many, so quickly."

"I will keep a close watch on the moods of our group Heranza."

No proper introduction, though Sarah's often eccentric memory, just needed a shove. She remembered that the male Arbiter was called Nazili, Nazili Anso. The female was the taller of the two and called Heranza Methun. The Arbiters didn't seem happy about entering the cellar and Rory's bright lights hurt their eyes. Once they were back to using flashlights, their guests seemed happier. Hardly surprising that Anna was hovering, looking at Ruby in a meaningful way.

"Sorry, I know you must be tired." Said Ruby. "My friend was hurt during the digging of a tunnel to reach the sacred stone. She lost an eye and healing such an injury is beyond my skill."

"No it isn't Ruby.....But there is no time to teach you." Said Nazili. "I will gladly heal your friend and the wounds of others who follow you, mental wounds as well as physical."

Sarah was getting better with blood and other bodily fluids. She could cope with a bloody battle without passing out, or hiding in a corner. A small crowd formed to watch Nazili fix what was left of Anna's eye. To Sarah that had far too much potential to be bloody and gory. She walked towards the other end of the cellar and noticed Todd was walking in the same direction.

"I'm alright with blood.....But eyes.....Oh, no." She told him.

"Me too."

"Liar."

He jumped back, she'd actually made him look nervous. Sarah spent so much time with Ruby, that many of the humans in their group assumed she was one of the wunderkinds.

"I'm not in your mind Todd, I just know you've a few personal demons." She said. "Trust me, it takes one to know one. I don't want Nazili curing any of mine either. My assortment of neurosis are a major part of me now, along with the booze problem. Curing them would be like....Losing an arm."

"I feel the same way, but Ruby..... She seems intent on healing me." Said Todd. "I just know she'll ask the Arbiters to take a look at me."

“Tell her off Todd, I mean it. Tell her no, don’t let her bully you. I’m not going to say you’ll win her respect and go on to live happily ever after.....But you need to tell her.”

“Thanks Sarah, I will.”

Sarah found a place to sit on the floor, until the whoops and cheering told her that Anna probably had two good eyes again. They weren’t friends, she still wanted to beat Anna up one day, or tell all the men in her life she had really bad bacterial vaginosis. An eye though, no one deserved to lose an eye, not even Anna. Sarah pushed her way through the happy crowd and gave Anna a genuine hug.

“Are you alright now ?” She asked.

“Great, I can see better than I could before. I think I might have needed lenses.”

Anna had two perfect looking eyes that sparkled in the light from several flashlights. Her nemesis was well again, animosities could begin again. Sarah kissed her on the forehead.

“Just stay away from Spider, or I’ll blacken both of them.”

“Understood.” Said Anna, with a huge grin on her face.

Sarah tried to get back to sleep, but there seemed to be a lot of excited people in the cellar. When it had to be close to dawn and she was just feeling sleep pull her into unconsciousness, Sophie flicked a sock at her face.

“Ow..... Hey, that stinks.”

“I saw you with Anna..... What a bitch huh ?”

Good old Sophie, she might be a little crazy, but she understood the whole sisterhood thing. She always knew the right thing to say.

“Yeah, I put her in her place.” Said Sarah.

“You should have come and listened to Ruby talking to Heranza, it was so interesting. A bit scary too, hearing about what they used to call The Hand of God. Until they realised it was a curse of course.”

Sarah was tired, but to hell with it, Ruby would be waking them all up soon anyway. For some reason Ruby waking them up to begin trudging again, was making her a little angry.

“Is this Hand of God, the thing in the tower we’re heading for ?” Sarah asked.

“Don’t call it that Sarah, they’ve destroyed that name on every carving in every temple. They’ve called it The Curse for thousands of years.”

“Where did it come from ?” She asked.

“Another world..... Can you believe that ? They were so advanced they could move between worlds the way Kallina goes home to feed her cat, Constanze. They found no intelligent life in any of the nearby galaxies by the way.”

“That’s disappointing.....I always did want to believe.”

“Me too Sarah, me too. Anyway, they found something in another galaxy light years away. No traces of any alien race, they never did find any of those. It was buried on a beach, almost as though it had landed there and millions of years of tides had buried it in the sand. It had called out to them, burrowing into their minds in some way.”

“What did they find Sophie ?”

“Difficult to follow descriptions in their language. Like a huge shattered boulder of slate, destroyed but still all the pieces were fused together. Not natural, they did think it was a machine of some kind, a robot. It seemed to be intelligent though, working out what they needed to advance their civilisation.”

“Wow !” Exclaimed Sarah.

“Yes wow.....It gave them not just vast amounts of clean energy, it multiplied their mental powers too. It was also subtly changing their minds, changing the way they thought. Minor differences of

opinion became the causes of wars. They'd nearly been wiped out in several dreadful civil wars, before they realised the cause."

"The rock, the curse." Said Sarah.

"Yes, the rock."

"Why didn't they take it to somewhere light years away and leave it there?"

"I was beginning to think like that Sarah and I was trying to listen properly to Heranza. It was just that Anna had two eyes again about then....I missed some of it. As far as I can remember and from what I heard, The Curse stopped them from removing it from their world. It appears it took thousands of their most powerful Arbiters to bring it here."

"That makes sense, it was an intelligent rock after all." Said Sarah.

"Not was, it still is. Tomorrow we should reach the tower and see it. Isn't that exciting?"

It wasn't, not really. The idea of coming face to face with The Curse, terrified Sarah. There was the whole sisterhood thing though and Sophie had made the right noises about Anna.

"Yes, it will be so exciting." She said.

Sarah drifted off to sleep with the idea in her head that Ruby shouldn't have brought them all to such a dreadful place. That made Sarah feel a little anger, subtle totally justified anger.

~ ~

Mukami Kibore, better known to everyone as Doc, quite liked the hospital waiting room. There was a machine that dispensed a decent cup of coffee and another full of assorted packets of junk food. Add on the comfortable chairs and it was the snuggest place he'd been in for a while. It had sleeping under canvas beat hands down. He'd already had one long sleep and was settling down for another six or seven hours.....

"He's awake now."

There was that couple of seconds when he was half awake and half asleep. The nurse became part of his dream about something.....No good, the memory of the dream evaporated as he recognised where he was.

"Sorry.....I haven't slept properly for weeks. Is he alright?"

"His doctor will talk to you later, but yes, he should be fine now. He was in surgery for several hours though...Your friend is a very lucky man."

"Can I see him?" Asked Doc.

"Yes, I'll show you where he is."

As they walked down the corridor, Doc noticed a smell, an odour that was competing with the disinfectant all hospitals seemed soaked in. A nasty smell, which he finally realised was coming from him.

"I know it's a bit cheeky, but is there somewhere I could clean up a little?"

She had a nice smile, though she did wrinkle her nose as she replied.

"Strictly it's staff only, but.....I'll point out the shower room as we go past it."

"Thank you."

Spider had a room to himself, with Rupert Bailey written in chalk on the instruction board next to the bed. Spider would hate the hospital staff calling him Rupert and Doc almost asked the nurse to change the board. Then his sense of humour decided to leave it as it was.

"Don't stay too long, he needs lots of rest." Said the nurse.

As for Rupert? He seemed to be sleeping already, until Doc made a noise by dragging a chair across the floor.

"Hi Spider, how are you doing old buddy?"

Spider coughed a little before answering and wiped his mouth with a tissue. Doc had seen people with more tubes plugged into them, but Spider's arms seemed covered in tubes and cannulas, yet more tubes and miles of medical tape.

"I feel like a dozen elephants just used me as a football."

"You killed it, did anyone tell you that ? You were found next to a very dead Nagala. One of the British soldiers even took a few pictures."

"Wow, I didn't know that....It makes up for them cutting off my left leg and right testicle."

"What !??"

Spider was grinning at him, of course he was. Doc should have realised it was just Spider being Spider, but after the last few days.....It hadn't sounded that farfetched.

"Yes, very funny.....I'm just glad to see you're alive and kicking."

"It was touch and go for a while I think, but I'm fine now. I'm just sorry to be missing the final part of the journey with Ruby. I was looking forward to seeing the world beyond the shroud."

"I'm happy here, in the waiting room with its comfy chairs."

The nurse was back, with a towel over her arm and what looked like soap and a small bottle of shampoo.

"Mr Bailey needs to rest.....Do you remember where the shower room is ?"

"Yes, I do."

"Good.....I didn't like to mention the smell.....But....." Said Spider. "Can you do me a favour before you go Doc ?"

"Yeah, what do you want ?"

"Rub out Rupert on the board and write in Spider."

If he was breaking some huge rule, the nurse never mentioned it. He changed the name of the board and followed her to the shower room.

~ ~

There had been wonderful forms of transport in the city, but that had been a very long time ago. The Arbiters had once visited distant worlds and other galaxies, using just the power of their minds. The technology was gone now, corroded away until nothing was left at all. As for moving through the power of thought alone ? There had been a few disasters where Arbiters had materialised inside solid rock, in deep oceans and even in the near vacuum of space.

"The Curse of course.....Now it's usually far safer to walk." Said Nazili.

Everything was blamed on The Curse, every setback, every disaster. The Curse had undoubtedly caused many problems, but Ruby doubted if it was the cause of every catastrophe. To the Arbiters it was a useful bogymen to blame for everything, the way medieval peoples had blamed every piece of bad news on witches. She sensed something else at work, a kind of mental entropy. The ancient Das Geheimnis had been sealed up inside their self-imposed prison for an unimaginably long period of time. That had to have quite a few detrimental effects.....

"Our congregation are likely to be a problem." Said Heranza. "They will view us helping you enter the shroud as heresy on our part. I doubt if they'll be violent, but I can't be sure. It's The Curse you see, it clouds everyone's judgement."

Ruby doubted if congregation was the right word, the Arbiters were adding to their English vocabulary by pulling words out of her head. Being a highly religious society, they tended to opt for those kinds of words.

"Maybe not violent to you." Said Ruby. "I'm assuming they're likely to attack my group on site, especially those who are totally human ?"

"No, not at all." Said Heranza.

"You're wrong.... Ruby is right." Said Nazili.

They exchanged a look that worried Ruby. They had sounded so sure of themselves when she'd spoken to them from the other side of the shroud. Now that she was actually with them, their lack of certainty worried her. Why had they been hiding outside of the cellar ? According to them tens of thousands of their people had died so that their essence, their souls, could be used to seal the shroud for all time. Was that all nothing but a confused myth ?

"Can we have a break Ruby ?" Asked Sophie. "I noticed Anna is struggling to keep up and there are a few others with injuries."

Others ? Yes, of course, there was Sarah and there had been a few twisted knees and ankles during the long trudge along the Great Rift Valley.

"Yes, of course Sophie.... Tell everyone to rest for half an hour."

When they were alone again Nazili moved close enough to whisper.

"You should take away their weapons Ruby. If the anger takes them....Many could die."

"I will watch for warning signs, but I won't disarm my group while they might still get attacked by your people..... How many are there left of your congregation ?"

She'd asked the question the night before, she'd asked several times. The answer ranged from about twenty to just over a hundred and seemed to vary with the mood of the Arbiters.

"Difficult to be certain, there have been a few recent burnings." Said Nazili.

"No more than thirty have survived, I'm sure of it." Said Heranza.

The ruined city covered a huge area, with the tower in the far distance as their ultimate goal. Between it and them were miles of ruins and broken ground. One solid looking gate though, set into a reasonably strong wall. Ruby had just called for an end to the rest break, when a fireball was aimed at them from the wall.

"Too far.....It'll never reach us." Said Nazili. "It's our congregation, they'll be angry and confused about why they're angry."

He was right, the fireball hit the ground nearly a quarter of a mile away and became a carpet of fire among the ruins. Everyone gathered around her, waiting for instructions. The soldiers had assault rifles, up and ready to fire.

"Probably won't hit anything at this range." Said Rory. "A burst might make them think twice about trying that again though, especially if they've never seen an assault rifle fired before."

The Arbiters were looking a bit agitated, but Ruby felt Rory was right. They couldn't afford to look harmless.

"Ok, show them what you can do." She said.

Three British soldiers with assault rifles, joined by Anna and Fabio with high powered hunting rifles. They fired for a while and Ruby noticed dust and debris flying into the air near the top of the wall.

"That'll make them keep their heads down." Said Todd, as the firing ended.

Ruby had begun walking towards the wall again, as the commotion began. It started as a series of tiny bangs, followed by an explosion of flame a little beyond the wall. The ground shook as a larger explosion cracked the wall a short distance from the gate.

"It's our people, the anger has turned them against one another." Said Nazili. "We must go to them, they'll listen to us."

"You can't go alone, they'll kill you." Said Ishel.

"No, you're the heretics to them, the unbelievers." Said Heranza. "We must go to them on our own. We are the last of the Arbiters, they'll never attack us."

“Alright.....I’ll let you try.” Said Ruby. “If it looks like you’ve been attacked, I’ll bring everyone to help you.”

“That won’t be necessary, the faithful respect our authority.” Said Nazili.

Ruby watched as it seemed to take the Arbiters a long time to reach the wall. They were obviously shouting up to those on the wall, though it was too far away to understand the words. Ruby tried to use her gift to read minds, but picked up only anger from those who guarded the wall.

“They’re letting them in.” Said Sarah. “That has to be a good sign, doesn’t it ?”

The gates were opened and the Arbiters slowly walked towards them. Had it all been a trap ? To Ruby, little that had happened inside the shroud seemed to make sense. As they stepped through the open gate, Nazili and Heranza were engulfed in fire.

“Come on.....Run.” She shouted. “They need our help.”

As Ruby ran towards the open gate, it was obvious the wunderkinds had been ready for a fight. Flames and fire seemed to be everyone’s choice, as fireballs went over her head and struck the wall. A thing of flames, a creature she recognised ran past her, a force of darkness she knew was Charlotte. As Charlie used tongues of flame on the top of the wall, Ruby built up a spell of pushing, crushing, and destroying.

“You will not stop us !” She yelled.

Her spell took out a large section of the wall, turning the rocks into dangerous shrapnel against those the other side of the wall. Ruby ran for the hole in the defences she’d just created, while continuing to pour destruction into the ruins of that ancient city. Only once did she question what she was doing and why she was feeling such enjoyment in destruction for its own sake. No good though, her rational mind had lost in the battle with her darker side, the part of her The Curse had been whispering to. She actually cheered as Charlie appeared on the top of the wall, a burning member of the Arbiters’ congregation held above her head.

~

~

© Ed Cowling ~ January 2021