

Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

Chapter 25 – The Island

“The large reinforced door to the bunker was open, which was a nice surprise. Add on the lack of gunfire in their direction and it could mean the bunker was empty. Nikitin didn’t like the idea of heroically attacking an empty hole in the ground. Orders were orders though.”

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It was on all the maps and charts as the Island of Hadseløya, though everyone referred to is as just The Island. Ruby knew Max and Baba Yaga had gone off to do their own thing, she’d have been disappointed if they hadn’t decided not to wait for everyone else. She could feel the intensity of Baba Yaga’s energy, as though she was a hot spot on her mental map.

“Baba Yaga and Max, are at the bridge.” She told Sophie.

All the expensive and high-tech comms were useless. Whatever Ishel’s rogues had set off, the interference with their tech seemed permanent. Engines still ran, but all the wonderful comms and data links, were gone. Sophie was her comms now, relaying information mentally, to those able to hear it. They in turn would tell the humans fighting with them. At least that was the quickly put together theory. Ruby knew there’d be people walking into battle, with no idea what was going on. There were several large explosions and flashes of blue light, in the direction of Skagen.

“They’ll live to regret attacking Kallina.” Said Todd.

“Come on, we need to run.” Said Ruby. “Twenty rogue fighters are quite a force and Kallina may have forgotten that. Tell everyone Sophie.....Those who can run, should be running.”

It was amusing to watch Sophie running, with her rocket launcher strapped to her back. She wore it like a huge sword, strapped across her shoulders. Exactly the same way she’d carried her bazooka in North Korea. Poor Sophie would be so upset, if there wasn’t an opportunity to use her favourite toy.

“I can see them.....Max, I can see Max.” Shouted Todd.

Ruby had been doing it gradually for some time, pulling energy from her surroundings. Life energy, the power every living thing contains. Do it gradually enough and spread it out to a large area, and it was possible to store huge amounts of energy without anything dying. A few bugs maybe, the occasional patch of green grass turned brown. Generally though, nothing cute, cuddly, or intelligent, was killed. There had been a few rats once, but Ruby didn’t let herself dwell on that. Dark arts some would call it, though Ruby had learned to ignore such judgements. Power was power and she needed every tiny bit of it. No gift ready in her head, she no longer needed to pre-load anything. She’d grown mentally, learning a lot from Nazili. There’d also been knowledge taken from the strange silicon lifeform in Africa, though she was still learning to use some of that.

“The trees to the left of the bridge.....I can feel the rogues.” Yelled Charlie.

“No sign of Ishel, I’d know if she was there.” Said Sophie.

Kallina and Max, seemed to have gone again, heading deep into the Island. No allies in the way and behind the trees was a wide stretch of open sea. There were no friendly forces to get caught in the effect of her gifts. Ruby did it on the run, without even slowing down. She thrust her hands forward, using them like a gunsight. Her force wall rumbled over the ground, picking up all sorts of loose debris. By the time it hit the trees and the rogues, it had to be like being struck by shotgun fire.

“Crap ! A warning would be nice.” Said Todd.

“Think how the rogues must feel.” Said Ruby.

The trees were thinly spread and looked as though the harsh winters hadn't done them any favours. Several had gone over, adding to the destruction. Someone was fighting back though, someone with similar gifts. It wasn't Ishel, or things might have turned out a different way. Ruby felt the force wall coming at her and countered it with her own. Ruby had been trained by the best and had a huge store of power. She forced the enemy's wall back on itself and then added more energy of her own. Unintentionally, Ruby's force wall spun around, creating a small tornado. It didn't last for long, but not a tree was left standing, by the time it stopped. Ruby heard Todd gasp.

“Before you ask, no that wasn't deliberate.” Said Ruby.

The explosion was a mystery, but it was large enough to flatten the area where the rogues had been hiding in amongst the trees. Ruby had heard Ishel had bought energy weapons manufactured by Gallaan Industries. Maybe their designs hadn't included enough safety shut offs. Whatever the reason, it was fairly obvious that one of the rogue's weapons, had blown apart.

“We can't assume every rogue is dead.” Said Ruby. “Bring up the vehicles, Sophie. We'll need to search the area.”

“How about wounded rogues.” Asked Charlie. “What do we do with them ?”

What were they going to do with enemy prisoners, wounded or otherwise ? Ruby was making it up as she went along. In truth, she really wasn't expecting any of the rogues to be taken alive. It was unlikely to be civilised warfare.

“Ask me again if we have prisoners.” She said.

“There is a little bit of space on the truck McGill is using.” Said Todd.

The vehicles arrived and the human soldiers joined the search for survivors. Ruby gave her speech several times to different groups of fighters.

“Leaving a single live rogue behind us, is beyond unthinkable. Just one left alive and armed, will mean a lot of casualties.”

Not that she didn't realise there'd never be a point of certainty. Time was limited and they had enemy bunkers to destroy. Eventually a halt would have to be called, for their forces to begin searching the island. Ruby thought of it as due diligence; reasonable steps taken by a person to avoid any of her forces being killed.

“Down there.....I can see bodies by the water.” Shouted Alex. “Check down there, make sure none of them is alive.”

It was their first casualty, the young Russian soldier almost cut in half by one of the rogues using an assault rifle. It seemed they'd been sold deep penetration rounds by someone, probably Gallaan. Charlie turned the rogue into a fiercely burning torch, before anyone else could react. Ruby chose to view that as a good thing. It showed the human fighters, what Ruby and her wunderkinds were capable of. Alex dealt with the dead Russian soldier. His people put him into a body bag, which was placed in their small command APC.

“No....No, you've seen what can happen.” Yelled Ruby. “Go further, another fifty yards along the water line.”

Three of the marauders had earned her anger. After seeing a Russian killed, they still didn't seem to be taking the search that seriously. One had moved a tree branch, without even looking under it. Her anger and their new zeal, brought results. Ruby was on her way back to her APC, when she heard the general chatter behind her.

“McGill's guys seem to have found two human soldiers.” Said Todd. “They might be Norwegians. I'll get Sarah to talk to them, she'll know their language.”

“Sarah knows every language.” Said Ruby. “One day an alien craft will land and Sarah will be there, chatting to the crew.”

As Ruby got into the APC, she saw the assumed Norwegians. Both needed to be carried, the man on a stretcher, while the woman was being supported by Rosie. They both looked dreadful, their uniforms covered in blood and the obligatory mud. Sophie was with them, no doubt delving into their minds, trying to make sense out of the situation.

“No.....Open the door.” Said Ruby. “Sophie was waving for my attention.”

The two men with the stretcher had stopped where they were, looking at Ruby for instructions.

“Is there a problem ?” Asked Rosie. “We took their weapons off them.”

“They’re not Norwegians.....Ask the woman her name, Ruby.” Said Sophie.

There wasn’t time for games, but Sophie seemed to have discovered something. The man looked the worst injured, but he’d probably live. The woman had lost a foot somewhere, though she seemed the more alert out of the two.

“What are your names ?” She asked the woman.

Two fairly generic sounding names, given in full with ranks and serial numbers. All given in perfect English. A learned lie, probably part of a script for just such a situation. Two heroic members of the Norwegian armed forces, but Ruby had picked up enough of her thoughts to know it was all fake.

“You’re Einar and Lena.....And you’re lovers.” Said Ruby. “I promise you won’t be harmed. Were you working for Gallaan ?”

“Yes.” Said the woman. “Look after Einar, he caught a bullet meant for me.”

“And your foot.....Our techniques might be unusual, but we might be able to help.” Said Ruby.

“Alright, take them to the truck.....But keep an eye on them.” Said Todd.

There’d need to be a long conversation with Einar and Lena, though that would come later. If they lived of course, if they all survived the coming battle with Ishel.

“Get Luca to look at them, Sophie.” She said.

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Tlal was being quite good about not saying the council had been right. All her advisers had predicted the same basic idea and Ishel had ignored them all. Gallaan would arrive and wipe out a large number of their forces, before being beaten. A Pyrrhic victory for her rogues, as the humans called such things. Gallaan had lost their entire force of mercenaries, but she’d lost most of her young warriors and the fierce creatures with deviant DNA. Worst of all, the breeding chambers had been destroyed and everything they contained. Ishel had her personal guard though, plus about two hundred rogues. Enough of an army to take over the world, if Ruby and her precious children hadn’t arrived on the island. Ishel was currently back inside her bunker, sitting in what her braver warriors, called her throne room.

“Alright.....Tell me I was wrong.” She said. “Doffle told me as much, before dying of his wounds.”

“Doffle loved you, as do we all.” Said Tlal. “Your army awaits your orders, no matter what they might be.”

“Did I fail to understand her ambition ?” She asked. “Ruby has arrived with the warriors of many nations. Does she intend to rule this world ? She could make a few senior people hers, it’s easy enough to do. Then she could eventually be ruler, even if no one knew it. That was my plan. Do you think she’s that ruthless ?”

“I spent some time with Ruby.” Said Tlal. “She never seemed to be interested in wielding that kind of power.”

“I never thought she’d turn against us, but she has.” Said Ishel.

More support for Ruby from Tlal. She had indeed spent a lot of time with Ruby, perhaps too much time. Sadly, there was no time to find a better leader of the council. The more she thought about it, the more sure she was.

“Ruby means to rule.” Said Ishel. “She wants this world to be hers. You’re unusually quiet Hemetre. I would appreciate the thoughts of the head of my personal guard. Talk openly, I want the truth ?” External validation was a curse and Ishel knew that. Hemetre was an open book, everyone knew that too. Her opinions always involved the maximum in violence, for an often-dubious cause. It made her a perfect leader for her guard, but incredibly predictable. Tlal gave an audible sigh, before Hemetre had even opened her mouth.

“No sighing, Tlal..... I’m fed up with your sighing.” Said Ishel. “Out with it Hemetre, give me your views ?”

“We shouldn’t be down here, hiding like rats in the sewers.” Said Hemetre. “Leave a small force to guard your bunker. The main force should be on the surface, fighting like real warriors. Take us up into the sunlight my Queen, lead us to victory.”

“Another battle we can’t win.....” Sighed Tlal.

Ishel did it almost by reflex. It was that damned sigh, every time she didn’t agree with a decision. Ishel used her blade, slicing through Tlal’s throat. A cut so deep, it almost severed her head from her shoulders. Tlal had been a loyal friend, but she now lay dead at her feet. Hemetre was smiling, actually smiling.

“Give me your orders, mother of our people.” Said Hemetre. “Let me lead our warriors to victory.”

“Yes.....Take our fighters to the surface.....But I will lead them.”

Hemetre bowed towards her, a deep humble bow.

“It shall be as you command.” Said Hemetre.

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Their landing craft did fairly well, for vehicles not really designed for cross country use. The column of energy disappeared into the ground, about thirty feet from the entrance to a bunker. Commander Igor Nikitin and his forces were on the wrong side of a deep ravine with a wide, fast flowing river at the bottom. Time to leave the vehicles and do it the old-fashioned way.

“We climb down and then climb up the other side, Hajna.” He said. “A piece of classic military action, that is both tiring and time consuming.”

“We needed helicopters and better maps.” Said Hajna. “The river isn’t on our charts and the satellite link is still dead.”

“Just be thankful that no one is firing at us, at least not yet.”

The large reinforced door to the bunker was open, which was a nice surprise. Add on the lack of gunfire in their direction and it could mean the bunker was empty. Nikitin didn’t like the idea of heroically attacking an empty hole in the ground. Orders were orders though.

“Come on, the ravine isn’t that deep.” He said.

Silly to have mentioned the lack of enemy action, it was bound to bounce back on him. No soldier tempts fate in that way, not if he wants to live long enough to receive a pension. As Nikitin left the vehicle, someone fired an assault rifle at them. Just the one and that stopped after a fairly aggressive return of fire. None of his troops had been hit, but it meant being extra cautious as they climbed down the ravine.

“It’s not as steep as I thought.” Said Bohdan. “There’s even an animal pathway we can probably follow.”

Bohdan was a squad leader who excelled in getting around obstacles. Not the best in tests, but in the heat of battle and under fire....Nikitin wouldn't trust anyone else half as much. Like many of his people, Bohdan hadn't been born in Russia. A man from Georgia, the original, not the one in America.

"We might need to leave the heavy equipment behind." Said Hajna.

"Then we leave it....Our orders are to investigate the bunker."

The animal trail wasn't that bad, there had to be goats on the island, or something similar. About halfway down the enemy with an assault rifle started up again. One of Nikitin's soldiers was hit and fell from the path. The fall probably wasn't bad enough to kill him, but the bullet probably had. He lay there motionless, arms stretched out, at the muddy edge of the river. Again, the attack stopped after a return of fire.

"We need to move quicker." Said Bohdan.

The last few yards were taken at almost a run, though luckily no one fell. The river was wide, but quite shallow. Everyone waded across, taking it in turns to watch for an attack from above. There was no assault rifle fire.

"Do you think we got the guy with the AK?" Someone asked.

"Assume we didn't, you might live longer." Said Bohdan.

The animal trail continued on the other side of the river. Being drenched up to their knees, didn't help sure footedness. There were a few close calls, one soldier nearly ended up falling. About halfway up, the assault rifle began again, though the fire was going nowhere near them.

"If he leans out, I'll get the bastard." Said Bohdan.

An AK could cut a car in half, as long as it didn't run out of bullets. As the shots began to hit the ground close to them, their enemy must have leant out too far. Bohdan fired a quick burst, which was followed by a scream from above. Their enemy fell, his body landing in the middle of the river.

"Don't assume he was alone." Said Nikitin.

Difficult to be certain, uniforms are intended to make everyone look identical. Their dead enemy looked like a woman to Nikitin, a human woman. He'd been told to expect a few human mercenaries, but it was still a shock.

"I think that's a woman." Said Bohdan.

No one said anything, there was still a long way to go, up a very steep path. The top ten feet or so of the trail was the worse. Once on flat, solid ground, he wanted to give a little cheer. On his own and he might have done, but soldiers expected their commanders to have a little gravitas.

"A quick break, Hajna." Said Nikitin. "I think we all need it."

"Fifteen minutes, drink and eat what you brought." Shouted Hajna. "Keep an eye on the open bunker door, they might not all have left."

The open door felt wrong, like a huge sign saying no one was home. It didn't make sense. There had to be valuable equipment still down there, expensive kit that needed protecting. Maybe the creatures didn't think like humans. Nikitin had made up his mind though, he had his orders.

"Even if it's empty, we'll still blow it up." He said.

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Spider hadn't intended to be on wounded watching duty. At first Sarah had been needed to talk to the assumed Norwegians and he'd arrived with her. When the Norwegians turned out to be an Icelander and an American, both able to speak fluent English; plans should have changed. He and Sarah were on the truck by then though, heading across the bridge to the island. Luca was with

them, tending to the man called Einar and the woman called Lena. Sophie was with them too, mainly it seemed, to relay information to Ruby.

"I can fill Lena with antibiotics, change the dressing and she'll live." Said Luca. "As for Einar....He's got a punctured lung and I can't stop the bleeding. He needs your help, Sophie."

"Yeah, put the whammy on him." Said Spider.

"We're not interchangeable." Said Sophie. "Ruby can heal, though Kallina is probably the best at it. Charlotte can set people alight, if you ever need that. Me.....I'm really good at blowing people up."

"You've helped me before." Said Luca.

"That was different and we weren't in the back of a truck, going over rough ground." Said Sophie. "I might actually kill him, while trying to stop the bleeding."

It didn't seem deliberate, but Lena chose that moment to gasp and kiss Einar on the forehead.

"He'll die if we do nothing." Said Luca. "And I've done all I can."

"Fine, but not in a moving truck." Said Sophie. "Moving him will just make him die quicker. I need the truck to stop.....For at least half an hour."

"Fuck that." Muttered one of the marauders.

"I'll talk to the driver." Said Sarah.

Spider knew she'd persuade the driver to stop for a while. No one could say no to Sarah, once she'd decided on something; he certainly couldn't. Two or three minutes later, the huge truck pulled to one side of the dreadful excuse for a road and stopped. By the time Sarah was back with him, Sophie was pulling off Einar's shirt.

"The driver said twenty minutes, then he's moving again." Said Sarah.

"Is that enough time?" Asked Lena.

"It'll have to be." Said Sophie.

Spider had seen a lot of dreadful wounds during his army days, but he'd never quite got over that feeling, when everything seemed covered in blood. Sophie's hands, the truck floor, even Lena's hands were bright crimson. It seemed so much blood, too much to lose and still survive. Sophie seemed to be immune to the effect of seeing so much blood.

"I found it.....Hold him, this is likely to be painful." Said Sophie.

No one had any idea what she was doing, except her. Spider put his weight on Einar's legs, while Luca and Sarah held his arms. It reminded Spider of a time in the wild area of a nation somewhere in the east. A medic had both his hands deep in a soldier's guts, or at least it looked like that. Spider had held the man's arms that time. Spider couldn't remember all the details, but he remembered that the wounded soldier had died.

"Jeeezz, that's a lot of blood." Said one of the marauders.

"Shut up.....Sophie needs to concentrate." Snapped Spider.

Einar was unconscious, though he did twitch a little. There was the smell of burnt flesh, as Sophie's hands began to glow. Eventually Sophie smiled and Spider knew that Einar was more likely to live, than he had been.

"The driver says we're leaving." Someone yelled.

"Not yet.....I need more time." Shouted Sophie.

Sophie was sat astride Einar, running her hands over his chest; when the driver opened the rear doors.

"They're Gallaan, or so I heard." Said the driver. "I'm not risking half a dozen fighters and all our equipment, for two fighters who were our enemies yesterday."

"Hey, she just needs a few more minutes." Said Spider.

“No, there are lights coming towards us from the north.” Said the driver. “We have no people in the north.....We’re leaving.”

“He’s right, but we need to stay here.” Said Sophie. “Help me.....All of you, help me get him out of the truck.”

“We’re staying.....Here ?” Asked Luca.

“It’s the only way.” Said Sophie.

Sophie was only small, some would say tiny, but once she was angry and determined. Sarah helped Lena, while the rest of them, including the driver; carried Einar out of the truck. They gently put him on the ground. No mud, but they were putting a seriously injured soldier, on the ground. No rain, but there was a biting cold wind.

“Sophie.....This is insane.” Said Spider.

“I know a few tricks....Safer this way, out in the open.”

No lights on the truck, it vanished into the darkness very quickly. They heard the sound of its engine for a few moments, before that too, vanished into the gloom caused by the ever-growing cloud cover.

“It’s cold here, too cold for a wounded soldier.” Said Luca.

“You’ll see.” Said Sophie.

“I can see the lights he mentioned.” Said Sarah. “They’re not that far away.”

Spider looked and there were a few lights among the trees. Just the pinpoint of light a group of soldiers would use, to avoid falling over anything in a wood. It was still officially daylight hours, but the dense storm front had turned day to night. Meanwhile, Sophie was astride Einar again and chanting. Her words meant nothing to him, but reminded him of the kind of things, Baba Yaga had chanted.

“They hurt him; their power can heal him.” Yelled Sophie.

Up went Sophie’s hands and the sky seemed to answer her plea. Down came a bolt of energy that lit up Sophie, and them, like a floodlit football match. If the approaching lights were an enemy, they definitely knew where they were. As the bright light faded away, Sophie seemed spent.

“It worked.....Einar will live.” She muttered.

The wounded soldier lay there, motionless. Spider had seen Sophie in action many times and if she said Einar would live, he believed her. A thought crossed his mind.

“Hey, where is your rocket launcher ?”

“Damn, I left it in the APC.” Said Sophie.

“They might be friendly..... You might not need it.” Said Luca.

Spider hugged Sarah and kissed her cheek, as they watched the lights among the trees. They all seemed to be heading one way now, towards them. One thing worried him, the driver of the truck had been right. None in their forces were in the north.

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Commander Igor Nikitin had told his soldiers to be alert, several times. The problem was that not being attacked for the first few levels of the bunker, made them all assume the place was empty. Even he was beginning to drift slightly. Destroying anywhere that size was impossible, so his mind was occupied; thinking of ways to ensure it would be of no further use to the rogues.

“Nice of them to leave the emergency lights on.” Said Hajna.

“They’ve gone, that much is obvious.” He said. “We need to make sure we’ve searched everywhere, though I doubt if we’ll find anything. On the way out, we’ll bring down the entrance hallway. That should stop them getting back inside.”

“We brought enough RDX explosives to easily accomplish that.” Said Hajna.

Two more corridors and if only they’d seen a few dead bodies. The bunker not only looked clean and well maintained, it also looked like somewhere a million miles from any war. Locked cupboards that might have contained priceless advanced technology, if he could be bothered to break them open. Nikitin was fed up with the bunker and eager to join the battle he knew had to happen on the surface. He’d do as ordered, before saying good riddance to the damned place.

“Blyad'.” (Fuck) Said Hajna.

Just another room, just like the other dozen or so they’d walked through. Only when he looked, it wasn’t exactly the same. There was a large blue orb at the far end of the room, with two men in robes stood in front of it. Only they were too tall to be men.

“My God, it’s them.....The creatures.” Said Bohdan.

Seven or eight of his troopers with him, plus Hajna who knew which end of a gun to point at the enemy. Further up the bunker, another twenty or so soldiers, were giving each room and corridor, a thorough search. Nikitin knew the rules required him to know how his men and women were deployed, at all times. No use, his mind refused to be definite about whether he had seven, or eight troopers with him. Not that it mattered, he had enough firepower to deal with two tall creatures in robes. The two rogues looking at them, didn’t even appear to be armed.

“Stand still.....Stay where you are and you won’t be harmed.” Yelled Nikitin.

One of the rogues pointed at them and one of his soldiers opened fire with an assault rifle. After that everything happened as a fast, confusing blur. Despite being told the creatures had some kind of mental powers, Nikitin had assumed they’d still use guns and explosives in any firefight. He realised his error, when an unseen force sent him crashing against the ceiling, twenty feet above the tiled floor. Twenty feet doesn’t sound high, but Nikitin felt two of his ribs crack, as he came down and hit the hard floor. Instinctively, he rolled towards the nearest pile of debris. It had all happened so fast; a table and cupboard had been caught up in whatever had hit him. So had Hajna Kállay, her body was half covered in what was left of the table. The way her head was twisted and the amount of blood coming from a wound he couldn’t see.....Hajna was dead.

“The commander is alive; I saw him move.” Someone yelled.

Not all his troopers were dead, several were still firing at the enemy. Luck seemed to have a lot to do with survival, there were several solid pillars to hide behind. Commander Igor Nikitin liked to consider how to act, after weighing up the pros and cons. There was always more time than you think, had been the mantra of the famous general at the training academy. True, the general probably wasn’t thinking about weird alien creatures, but the idea was still a solid one.

“There’s always more time than you think.” He said.

“Sorry.....Did you say something ?” Someone asked.

“Keep firing, keep them busy.” Yelled Nikitin.

Just two of them, but the destruction caused by the creatures in such a short time, was dreadful. Not one piece of furniture was still in one piece. Tiles had actually been stripped off sections of the floor. One of them was hurt, though it wasn’t slowing them down. He or she was definitely favouring one leg. Good, if they could be hurt, they could be killed. The problem was that their defensive position had been prepared. They had several thin transparent screens in front of them, which seemed impervious to their gunfire. Preprepared defences meant they were there to defend the large blue orb. The orb was huge, almost touching the ceiling. Now he was giving himself time to look at it properly, there was a glow between the orb and the ceiling. It was the source of the energy column that reached up into the clouds, Nikitin was sure of it.

“Ignore them, fire at the blue orb.” He shouted.

“What ?”

“The huge fucking blue thing, Bohdan.”

It wasn't screened, Nikitin could see the assault rifle round causing sparks as they hit it. The two creatures weren't happy though, they seemed particularly agitated. They used the trick again, the unseen whirlwind. Another of his troopers ended up bent in two, but he couldn't see their face. The whirlwind seemed fairly untargeted, picking him along with Hajna's body and a pile of debris. He was slammed against a wall and it hurt like hell. Not all bad news, the grenade launcher was barely a foot away, along with a few grenades on a leather strap. Would a grenade do any better than armour piercing rounds ? There was only one way to find out. Nikitin picked up the weapon and crawled over to the nearest metal pillar.

“Are you alright, commander ?”

“Fine, Bohdan....Never been better. Keep them busy, I want to try something.”

Only two assault rifles firing now, his troopers would eventually all be killed. As for the two rogues.....The one with the limp appeared to be having trouble getting about. Probably a lucky shot, or a piece of shrapnel, but it meant they were effectively now down to one and half fighters. Nikitin loaded the grenade launcher and looked around the pillar.

“Too far really.....I'll aim high.” He muttered.

The range was well beyond the weapon's limit on accuracy. If he aimed high and let it drop though, there was a chance he might get lucky. Nikitin fired and the creatures reacted. Wow, they had the kind of reaction time any soldier would give a left arm for. The uninjured one waved his hand in the direction of the grenade and it went up, to bounce off the ceiling. Good news for the huge blue orb, but not for the rogues. The grenade bounced off the ceiling, then off the top of their shields. When it exploded, the grenade was about level with their chests, or whatever they had where people had chests.

“If you can walk away from that.....Mankind is fucked.” He muttered.

They weren't going to be walking away, though both of the rogues were still moving. There was blood on the inside of their screens, red blood. It cheered him up to think that the monsters bled blood the same colour as his.

“I'm low on ammo.”

“Keep firing.....Keep firing.” Yelled Nikitin.

He loaded the grenade launcher and took careful aim. Over the top of their shields and in theory at least, the grenade would hit the centre of the blue orb. What would happen then ? Nikitin had no idea; he didn't have any idea what the damned thing was. He fired hoping to turn the orb to a pile of debris. One of the creatures moved, but there was no hand movement, not this time.

There was a popping sound as the grenade exploded, as though someone had burst the largest balloon in the world. Then came the suction, as everything was pulled towards that end of the room. Poor Hajna, she wasn't allowed to rest in peace. Her body was pulled along with the debris, towards whatever was happening. Nikitin leaned his back against the pillar and smiled at Bohdan.

“Did we win ?” Shouted Bohdan.

“I think we did.”

Pain then, though mercifully only for a fraction of a second, as the intense heat burned away the skin on his face. After that, Commander Igor Nikitin ceased to exist. The explosion totally destroyed the lower levels of the bunker. The rest of his troopers were vaporised, along with all the floors above. The river outside the bunker became a cloud of steam, as the heat from the explosion escaped the

confines of the bunker. The world had rarely seen such a huge burst of energy, it was guaranteed to bring the spy satellited to that part of Norway. They do say every cloud has a silver lining, though sometimes it's very hard to see. The column of power had gone, taking the storm front with it. Once again, sunlight could reach the surface of Hadseløya Island.

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Baba Yaga was now her main identity; the persona had taken over. It had happened once or twice before, though it was rare. On the last occasion she'd been living near the sea in Georgia. After thinking she'd be Baba Yaga forever and what that entailed. Having food delivered had already become problematic. She'd woken up one morning as Kallina. As simple as that, as though something had run its course and vanished. She was currently hovering at about eighty feet from the ground, using a few large trees for cover. She was holding Max, trying to keep him calm. He seemed to lack trust in her for some reason.

"Be still, I'm not going to drop you."

"You have done, in the past." Said Max.

"That was different, I intended to drop you. I'd never drop you by accident."

They could see the entrance to the hole in the ground, the one where Baba Yaga knew Ishel had her headquarters. There had been a lot of comms chatter about it being the breeding centre for the rogues, before a massive electrical pulse had killed their comms. An odd choice to double as her seat of power, or maybe it wasn't. Ishel would see the breeding chambers as her future, her followers to be.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Asked Max. "This isn't either of the sites with the columns of power rising out of them. I don't see Ruby below us, waiting to attack."

"Ruby has more people to bring here and more equipment." Said Baba Yaga. "She'll feel it, in fact I know she's on the way. I can feel her mind. Soon.....Everyone will be here."

The flash of light hurt her eyes, but it didn't last for long. It was out to the west and lit up the entire island. The flash was followed by the sound of an explosion. The air shook, as Baba Yaga held onto Max.

"What the hell was that?" Asked Max.

"I have no idea, but one of the columns of energy has gone." She replied. "So much intense heat, there was even a short burst of X-rays. Everyone on the planet with spy satellites will have seen it. We need to hurry; everyone really will be here.....To see what happened."

"You really want us to attack Ishel, just us?" Asked Max.

"Oh dear.....Come on Max, you would have once gone in there, armed with just a piece of lead pipe. Now you have body armour and an assault rifle."

"I was younger then." Said Max.

"Weren't we all. Come on, the blast has finally lifted the storm clouds."

Baba Yaga carried him over the trees and a small stream. They landed less than fifty yards from the ruined doorway to what had once been, the breeding chambers. Ishel appeared, coming out of a barn that had little of its roof left. With her were her honour guard, a dozen of the toughest of her rogues.

"Good.....good, let's get this done." Said Baba Yaga.

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