

Ruby 3

Chapter 20 – The Settlement

“The energy beam was designed to be invisible, but it ionised the air slightly to create a glowing line from her to the target. She’d heard the designers hated the ionised air trail problem, but hadn’t worked out a way to fix it.”

Δ

Monique Ostby had become quite good at estimating the time in their jail. By the crispness of the night air and the position of certain bright stars, she could see through the gap in the wall. Her expensive watch hadn’t been one of the essentials she’d been allowed to bring with her. She hadn’t been there that long, yet she’d already reverted to the knowledge of her ancestors to tell the time. Days were easier; Max had a calendar scratched out on one wall. As far as she could tell, she was sat looking down the latrine hole at about half past three in the morning. Monique was crying, the real kind of weeping, the serious sorrow that most people keep hidden until they’re alone.

“I’m sorry Lionel.” She muttered, through her tears.

Not that the time really mattered, though her mental demons seemed to prefer to come out at night. During the day she rarely felt the despair that arrived with the darkness. It was quiet at night too; even the creatures outside seemed subdued once the sun had vanished in the west.

“No, you’re not welcome here.”

The insects tended to be those seeking shelter, merely passing through the hole in the ground Monique thought of as her personal Bastille. Reptiles and small mammals were different; they were always attracted by the smell of food. Even empty cans had enough food residue left in them to stink after a while. They put all food tins and packaging in black bags for Kallina to take away, but sometimes there were quite a few waiting in a corner. Monique could hear something ripping at a rubbish bag, something big by the sound of it.

“Not tonight.....I will not let you disturb me tonight.” She said.

Max’s stick was on the table, his club for taking care of uninvited guests. She knew where it was and the darkness wasn’t total if it was a clear night. Only starlight and sometimes the moon, but it was enough to see the layout of the room if you were used to it. Monique had begged for candles.

“No, it’s too dangerous.” Kallina had told her. “The light from a single candle will travel for miles at night, out here, in the desert. It will be investigated and in all probability, those who arrive won’t be friendly.”

Monique held the stick in her right hand and advanced towards the pile of sacks. There’d always been someone to take care of things like vermin, even the bed bugs her closest friends didn’t know about. A phone call brought experts who took care of most of life’s little problems, for a fee. Now she was on her own.

“Bastard.” She muttered.

It was there in front of her, a thing with fur and claws. Big too, though not as big as a cat. Bigger than a rat maybe and definitely bigger than the lizard Max had recently bludgeoned to death. As it ripped at the sack, she brought the stick down, aimed at its head. It moved as the stick hit, but the creature had shrieked in pain.

“See.....Invade my home and this is what happens.”

It had run to her left, past the hole in the ground. Perhaps a good thing, that side of the room had the benefit of light from two wide slits in the wall. She walked slowly round the outside of the room, making sure every nook and cranny was investigated. She saw what looked like a clawed foot and struck. Again there was a screech, as the creature backed away.

“Don’t like it when I fight back.” She muttered.

Everything was a mutter; she didn’t want to wake Max. He’d take the stick off her and wait until morning to kill the thing with fur. Monique wanted it dead that instant and she had to be the one to do it. She began to walk around the edge of the room again, thrusting the stick at every particularly dark place. When she did see the creature it wasn’t hiding. The thing with fur and claws was big, maybe as big as a small cat. It would have needed to squeeze through even the widest gap in the walls. It was coming for her, shrieking as it came. Monique felt more angry than afraid.

“You disturbed my peace and quiet.....Now this.”

She hit it hard, with all her strength. Not good enough, there was still movement discernible in the darkness. Monique struck again and again, until the sound of her blows was no longer followed by a shriek or an animal scream. She used the tip of the stick to push the bloody mess right up to the edge of the latrine hole. The light was best there, what little light there was. It wasn’t going down the hole, not yet anyway. Max had to see it first and make the right noises about her vermin killing skills.

“Wow, that is bigger than anything Max has killed.”

Easily as big as a small cat, it had fur, clawed feet and a snout full of sharp teeth. Some dreadful thing that called the Yemen home, though she had no idea what it was. A carrion feeder probably, attracted by the odour from their rubbish sacks. Monique felt real pride at being capable of killing such a fierce looking beast.

Monique sat opposite the beast on the other side of the hole in the floor. Once comfortably sat, cross legged, she resumed the silent weeping the creature had disturbed. She wasn’t crying because she was serving an indefinite prison term. She wasn’t crying because Lionel was dead. She definitely wasn’t crying for the thing with fur she’d just beaten into a bloody mess.

“We’ve both become barbarians, monsters.”

She knew Max had a reputation, but she doubted that he’d have normally killed someone like Lionel over something so relatively trivial. She would never have hurt her husband, out there, in the real world. There was no doubt in her mind that the prison had turned them into brutes. Monique wept for the loss of what she had been and the reality of what she had become.

“When Max wakes up, I’m telling him. We have to start making plans to escape from this dreadful place.”

~ ~

The bad language told Charlotte she hadn’t died and gone to heaven. Her vision was blurry, but her ears seemed to be working well.

“You told me you knew the fucking way Jai.” Yelled Pablo.

“I know the north really well, but not near the border with Guatemala. No one knows all the roads in Mexico, no one.”

“He’s got a point.” Said Olga.

She remembered falling into fire somewhere.....Yes, she had killed Arturo. That thought gave her enough of a boost to sit up in the back of the car. Everyone seemed to be in the middle of the road and involved in an argument.

“We came through that shit hole La Misteriosa not long ago.” Said Jai. “Keep going south and we have to hit the border.”

“Can I have some water ?” Asked Charlotte. “I’m really thirsty.”

“You’re sure you can find the way south ?” Asked Pablo.

“How long was I unconscious ?” Asked Charlie.

“Yeah....Very funny.” Yelled Jai.

“None of this helps us get to the border.” Said Olga. “Stop squabbling, we’re going to drive south.”

“Why is no one listening to me ?” Shouted Charlotte.

Olga ran to the car first, opening the door to get a good look at her. That look, the thoughts Charlie was picking up. They weren’t just surprised she was alive, there was something else...

“Bless every fucking God, even the ones I don’t believe in.” Said Olga. “She’s awake.....Charlie is awake.”

“Awake and very thirsty.”

“Sorry.”

Olga handed her a warm bottle of water, which tasted like the most delicious drink she’d ever had. Not a huge bottle, though Charlie surprised herself by drinking half of it in one go. Pablo got himself into the passenger seat of the car quite quickly, looking at her over the top of the seat.

“When I pulled you out of that place.....I was sure you were.....”

“She doesn’t need to hear that right now.” Snapped Olga.

Luca was looking at her over the back of the driver’s seat. There was something about the way they were all looking at her, as though they were looking at a ghost.

“Do you remember much.....About the Hacienda ?” Asked Luca.

“I remember shooting Arturo several times and knowing he was dead.”

“That is really good news.” Said Pablo.

“After killing Arturo I remember the floor being burned away from below.....I fell into an inferno, I know I did.”

“You’re safe now.” Said Luca. “I need to check you over.....So if I we could give Charlie a little privacy everyone ?”

“Yeah, come on.....We’ll go and yell at each other in the lead car.” Said Olga.

“No one can know all the roads in Mexico.” Muttered Jai. “No one.....”

So many things she should have been aware of, didn’t enter her mind until Luca was with her in the back seat. All her clothes had gone and the only thing covering her nakedness, was a grubby blanket. A blanket that felt a little wet in places. Once the smell hit her consciousness, Charlie felt her cheeks becoming hot and flushed.

“Oh, I’m so sorry Luca.”

“Nonsense, you were out for hours and bodily functions have no respect for dignity. I have your pack with some spare clothing. Some sanitiser gel in the right places, a rinse off with water and you’ll be as good as new.”

Pablo had seen her naked, but they were by the side of a backroad in Southern Mexico and the others had never seen her unclothed. Luca must have picked up her reluctance.

“You were out for nearly two days Charlie, I suspect you’ll need to do more than just pee. Dump the blanket in the bushes and squat behind the car. I’ll keep an eye open and yell at anyone coming too close.....Go on.....I’ll give the car a wipe while you’re dressing.”

Luca had been right of course. Half a bottle of hand sanitizer, rinsed off with a full litre of bottled water and she felt like a different woman. The thing worrying Charlie was that she might really be a

different woman. She finished off with a good rub over with a clean-ish towel, before putting on the spare clothing she'd bought in Paris. The car wasn't exactly as fresh as a daisy, though that no longer bothered her. They'd be dumping both the cars once they were across the border.

"Thank you Luca, I'm so glad you came."

"You helped me, I help you.....It seems to be the way the world works. Did you find any open wounds as you washed ? If you did they'll need to be treated."

"No, not so much as a bruise."

"Good..... Are you ready for the others to come back ?"

Was she ? There were so many questions flooding into her mind and there were still those weird emotions coming from Luca.

"How bad was I when Pablo carried me out of the Hacienda ?"

"There's no point worrying about that, you're fine now."

Only fine wasn't the thought Charlie was picking up from Luca's mind. As Charlie started to feel better, she picked up more from Luca and those in the other car.

"You're all worried that I'm some sort of.....Monster."

"No, not at all.....It's just that you were so.....Just rest and get better."

"Tell me Luca.....Was I even alive when he brought me to you ?"

She hated doing it, but it was the only way to get at the truth, without waiting for it come out piecemeal over the course of weeks or even months. Charlie grabbed Luca's arm and gave the young medical student her best, tell me everything smile. Maybe not quite as good as Ruby could do it, but good enough to hear the truth from Luca.

"Tell me about when Pablo brought me to you ?"

"You were so badly burnt.....A cinder with an irregular pulse, hardly breathing. I didn't think you'd survive for more than a few minutes."

"I'm not burned now."

"It happened while we were driving south, Pablo noticed it first. The burned skin, the bullet holes, they all vanished. You seemed to slough off the old skin.....The bullet holes healed too. All impossible of course, completely impossible."

"Thank you for being honest with me Luca. Something similar happened to me a few years ago in Russia, near the railyards in Vladivostok."

"Were you burnt ?"

"No shot, but I came back again. Not with that body though.....But with a new one. It's difficult to explain, mainly because I don't understand it. Am I me, or the second exact copy of me ? I know what you'll say; does it matter as long as I'm not dead ? It matters to me.....I need to understand."

"Perhaps you'll never die." Said Luca.

"Someone else once suggested that. I find that idea.....Truly terrifying. Go on; tell the others they can come back. It's time we were on the move again."

~ ~

Lily aimed the sights the way she'd been shown and gently pulled the trigger back. A switch really, an electrical switch that felt like a trigger. Someone had even given the switch a pull weight of just over four pounds, to make it feel right to those experienced with traditional small arms. The energy beam was designed to be invisible, but it ionised the air slightly to create a glowing line from her to the target. She'd heard the designers hated the ionised air trail problem, but hadn't worked out a way to fix it.

"Wow." Said Lily.

She was still getting used to the way the energy weapon destroyed targets. She was still saying wow, a lot. The paper target with a man printed on it burst into flames, as did the wooden board it was fixed to. Practise with the weapon was creating havoc with the traditional targets at the range.

Another problem the tech guys were trying to resolve.

“You’re getting really good with static targets.” Said Bill. “Another three good shots and it’ll be just about time for lunch.”

“Can I try a moving target ?” She asked.

“Only after I think you’re ready. Three more static targets and maybe, just maybe.....You can try a few moving targets on your next visit.”

“For a nice guy, you can be really mean Bill.”

He was a nice guy, he was just intent on training her properly, with skills learned in the right order. He even put up with her cheeky sense of humour. Best of all he was good at explaining the weapon in a way that made sense to her. The classroom instructor knew his stuff and quite a bit of it had sunk in, eventually. It was just that he talked to them as though the entire class already had a PhD in applied electronics. For all she knew, many of them might have such a degree. To her a lot of it was just waffle, that had her wanting to nap right through it. Bill was different, he explained just what she needed to know, in a way she understood.

“I just want to shoot it well Bill.” She’d told him. “Not know how to patch a broken circuit board.”

He liked her, she could tell. Not in a creepy way, for all she knew he had a daughter about her age. Not that Bill ever talked about his family, or his life outside of the service. He took over a lot of her theoretical training on the weapon, on an unofficial basis.

“The weapon is a powerful energy weapon, that will damage most materials.” He’d told her. “What I mean by that is that it will melt car metal, burn through wooden walls and even shatter some brick walls. As you can imagine with that much power, it will easily kill any human targets who might have been stupid enough to attack your workplace.”

“But it’s really intended to kill the rogues ?”

“Yes Lily, though we call them DasGs. Don’t forget though...It is a deadly weapon against all would be attackers.”

She remembered that day. She’d so wanted to ask Bill about what the weapon did to the rogues, yet again. Pestering him had just felt wrong though and he was going to be the one filling in her training report card. Pissing off Bill seemed a daft thing to risk. She’d just given him her best upset puppy look, and luckily he’d taken the hint.

“Yes Lily, yes it is primarily intended to kill the DasGs. It couldn’t have been built without the tissue samples obtained from the male killed at your office. The energy beam is aligned to their cell structure.....Like applying the right high pitched sound to a wine glass.”

“Boom.” She said.

“More like squelch. Hit a rogue with the beam and most of its soft tissues will liquefy.”

“Oh, that sounds nasty.”

“It is, but better them than you Lily, better them than you.”

~ ~

Malou was pleased to see him and for that first day at least, that was enough for George Polandrous. He was there to help though, to try and provide an umbrella of a kind, to keep the troubles off Malou’s head. Lionel and Monique Ostby were well known, her father had been something of a national treasure. It only took one hint, one person pointing a finger, and Malou could find herself in

trouble and socially ostracised. Day two in Paris and George began to get out of neutral and into drive.

“We need to look at every likely link between you and Olga’s men.” Said George. “If the police do decide to take an interest in you and the hotel, that is the direction it will come from.”

No lounging in the reception area with coffee and nibbles, they were in her office at the rear of the hotel. Malou called it her dungeon, yet George couldn’t help noticing that it was still far more comfortable and cosy than his own office in London.

“Monique’s father, the fairly famous Henri Gervex was found dead in the street outside.” Said Malou. “Quite a few years ago, but the police have long memories. He was thought to have fallen from the roof of the building across the street, though I’m sure a few in the DGSE never believed that. Trust me, quite soon the police will be here, even if they just say it’s for a friendly chat.”

George had put that incident on his mental list, though he still thought it was a fairly vague connection. Probably too vague for the police or the security services to be bothered about.

“Hmmm like everywhere else, cuts have reduced what the police can do.” He said. “Personally I see the main problem as the men Charlotte took out with her that night. They must have been seen by staff at The Haussmann Night Club, all of them very close to the Ostbys. It only takes a CCTV match from there, with street cameras near the hotel.....I know it sounds a longshot, but....”

“No George, I know how good CCTV data and facial recognition is these days. Trust me, I am taking that very seriously.”

The look in her eyes, it could have easily been fifteen years before, when they’d been more than just friends, or twenty years before.....When she’d refused his offer of marriage. Not a lunge, he moved his head very slowly, giving her plenty of time to move her head. She didn’t try to avoid his lips finding hers, for their first kiss in a very long time.

“I didn’t come here assuming we’d.....”

“That’s alright George, I know that.”

The second kiss was initiated by Malou and her lunge was faster and far more passionate than his. Surely such nonsense was the domain of the young ? George had fooled himself with that idea for a long time, using it as an excuse to live the life of a sexual hermit. He kissed her back with equal passion and felt his heart begin to race.

“We have much to do, but tonight.....Will you join me for dinner Malou ?”

“Yes, of course I will.”

It took him a few seconds to bring his thoughts back to the matter at hand. Malou seemed to sense that he needed a moment.

“Coffee George ?” She asked. “I’ll get it brought up, with some fresh croissants.”

“That sounds a wonderful idea.”

By the time she called someone and arranged for refreshments, he was calm again.

“It might be low key, but you may already be under surveillance.” He said. “Have you noticed anyone strange hanging around outside ?”

“This is a hotel George and we’re not far from the Eiffel Tower. There are always strange people lurking around, it’d be strange if there wasn’t. People I know do watch the street, but it’s just about impossible to spot a properly organised surveillance team.”

“Would more resources help ? I can easily arrange for a few extra bodies to be out there, keeping an eye on who comes and goes.”

She laughed, Malou actually laughed at his suggestion. Luckily the arrival of coffee gave his wounded pride a few minutes to recover.

“George.....I’m sorry, your offer is appreciated, but you’re probably thinking of hiring more people like the couple who arrived with you. Well trained, excellent at getting between you and the fist of an angry protester. No street craft though, none at all. Not only will they spot no one, they’ll be spotted in seconds. In the old days, some might call them the good old days. Russian thugs wore what was an almost a uniform of the east. You could spot them easily and as long as a little mutual respect was accorded, they weren’t a problem. Now though, in western democracies....God help us George, you can’t tell the bad guys from the good guys anymore. I sometimes wonder if there is a difference anymore. Someone good would use a dozen well trained people to watch the hotel. They’d look like harmless teenagers, right through to a granny with a walking stick. Some would only go past the doors once a day. Spotting that kind of surveillance in a busy part of a busy city.....It can’t be done George. Can that be our secret though ? I usually pretend it’s easy.”

Oh that cheeky grin. So tempting to kiss her again, but George had the makings of a decent plan forming in his mind.

“It can be easy Malou. It can be done by one person, if it’s the right person.”

“You mean Ruby ? I can’t see her or Charlotte wanting to spend days sat in a front window, watching the street for hours.”

“Oh, Ruby’s wunderkinds can do that if they need to. They can spend days and days doing the same mundane task, without making errors or missing anything. Plus the person I’m thinking of will probably appreciate a little help with looking after the baby.”

“Alright George, I’m now officially confused. Tell me who you mean ?”

“Eugenie, she was born in Paris and speaks the language like a local. She’s currently sat in London, looking after Nari’s child. As she calls me at least three times a day, I think I can say with some accuracy that she’s bored out of her skull.”

“But Nari George.....Surely she expects her child to be kept safely in London ?”

“Seong, the girl is called Seong. Nari didn’t want to take her daughter on a trip to Kenya, where there might be a fight with the rogues, but here....In this comfortable hotel in Paris! A nanny can be hired to help Eugenie and I’m sure the staff will spoil the child.”

“Spoil her something rotten, as you English say.”

“So I can do it ? You’re happy for me to ask Eugenie to come here ?”

“Yes George, that sounds a very good idea.”

~ ~

Uganda never ceased to surprise Ruby. The headman of the settlement was called Joseph and his spoken English was probably better than Spider’s. It appeared the last headman had been a woman, which surprised Ruby in a good way. Joseph wasn’t out to cause problems at all, not really. Just trying to make the most of a golden opportunity to help his people. Luckily he’d added two and two and come up with about fifteen. Hardly surprising really, the truth would seem impossible to Joseph. “Let me guess Ruby.” He’d said to her. “You have sick friends, very sick friends. They wanted somewhere quiet and peaceful, somewhere without people staring at them and calling them names. We have cancer here too, though it’s mercifully rare. Children are children though and I’m sorry if they showed any disrespect.”

Joseph and the adults of the settlement had come and looked at the rogues, with their misshapen torsos and body parts where none should normally be. Being sane and sensible people, they’d come to the conclusion that Ishel and her warriors were suffering from a hideous disease of some kind, probably cancer. It was just the sort of belief that suited Ruby perfectly and she had no intention of telling Joseph the truth.

"We came here looking for a little solitude." She said. "Supplies are brought in by plane, or bought in Tororo. As a sign of appreciation of your kindness, we could easily share some of our supplies with your settlement."

"That would be very kind." Said Joseph. "In return we will give you privacy and try to ensure your community is left in peace."

In the end he'd offered the children as watchdogs for free, thrown in after they agreed an amount that showed respect to both parties. Any strangers within about five miles of the settlement would be watched and their activities reported to Ruby. Not that Joseph was a pushover, he'd insisted on an agreed weekly list of supplies to be sent to the settlement and a monthly amount in cash. Ruby had even been asked to sign a handwritten agreement.

"Not that I minded giving Joseph what he wanted." She told Doc as they left the settlement. "I'd have gladly given him three times what he asked for. We have good neighbours close by now, neighbours with alert and observant kids. They'll more than earn a few provisions and a little cash." "Ishel will still keep saying it was weakness that made you pay them off." Said Sophie.

"I know and I think I can live with her disapproval."

Two miles to walk over rough dry ground, on top of the two mile walk to the settlement. Ruby just wanted to get back to her tent and change into clean clothes that didn't smell of her own sweat. She saw the kids sitting in the bushes, barely twenty yards from the mining camp. Things were different now, the kids waved back when she waved. The eldest girl even came to her when she beckoned. A girl of about ten years old with wise eyes and a mop of dark hair.

"Do you speak English?"

"Yes."

"No being heroes, alright? If you see any strangers come and tell me. Don't go near them....Understood?"

The girl held her knuckles up to be bumped and Ruby bumped her knuckles against them. An agreement had been made, instructions given and understood. By the time Ruby got back to her tent, there was one more surprise waiting for her. Kallina was there, wearing a little black dress and her long blonde hair done up in a bun.

"On the way to the opera Kallina?" Ruby asked her.

"I'm going to see Malou in Paris and thought I'd make the effort. I was a bit grubby last time I saw her.....Malou has that way of looking at you."

"Ahh, the look of judgement and scorn." Said Ruby. "Malou is from a different age and doesn't mean anything by it. In her day all respectable ladies wore skirts all the time."

"Still.....I don't want to risk it. Besides, I've had this dress for a while and it's about time it saw some action. Come with me Ruby, we'll explore Paris by night."

So tempting, but Ishel was sure to start trying to foment rebellion if she vanished to Paris on a whim. And there was Todd to consider of course. They were still at that stage where her body almost ached for his.

"Don't tempt me Kallina." She said. "You can do me a favour though, can you track down Charlotte for me?"

"Hmmmmm Charlotte should be somewhere near the Mexican border with Guatemala by now. I can go there and home in on her easily enough, in theory. My movements are never an exact science of course, as you're aware."

“Do your best Kallina, ideally digging down to the sacred stone would be far easier and quicker with the three of us here. Let’s agree that we’ll create the hole in the ground three nights from now. Is that alright with you ?”

“Fine..... You can rely on me.”

Ruby inwardly cringed but said nothing. If all else failed she could probably create the tunnel required herself. It would leave her looking and feeling like a limp rag for days though and there were the Nagala to deal with.

“Do your best Kallina. Find Charlotte and persuade her to come here that night. Offer to bring her, if you think that might help. Once the hole has been completed there will be the Nagala and I can’t fight them on my own.”

“Do you have a plan to destroy those monsters ?” Asked Kallina.

“No, nothing at all, I’m winging it at the moment. Not that I’m letting that be generally known. An idea will come to me once we starting digging.....I’m sure it will.”

~ ~

Charlotte kept drifting in and out of dreams about fire and burning, which wasn’t surprising. Not nightmares, it felt as though she was a disinterested party, watching herself burn. Every time she woke up, Pablo was there in bed next to her. For about the sixth time that night, she hugged his back and kissed the back of his neck.

“Another bad dream ?” He asked, though he sounded half asleep.

“This one wasn’t as bad as the others. Go back to sleep.”

The house had been part of the original plan, somewhere to rest for a night, before boarding the ship a day later. Olga had said the house would give them twenty four hours to decompress after the attack on Arturo’s hacienda. Decompress seemed an odd word to use, but it felt appropriate. The house on the Guatemalan coast near Puerto Barrios had been booked under the name of a man who didn’t exist, using a bank account that had been closed the next day.

“No....I’m still me, I know I am.” She muttered, while half asleep.

Pablo rolled over and hugged her. It felt nice, but she couldn’t sleep properly cuddled up, it made her too hot. When she thought he was asleep, she gently disengaged from him and rolled onto her back. Of course when she fell asleep, it was straight back to watching herself fall through the floor into the inferno below. Was it her though, or was she her true self now ? Had the Charlotte who was real died that night in Vladivostok ? It was something that mattered to her, a question that needed answering. The problem was that not a living soul on the planet was likely to be able to give her a definite answer.

“No !” She yelled.

Awake again, with a worried looking Pablo pushing the sweat covered hair out of her eyes. Her breathing sounded erratic this time, that was new. She looked fully recovered from being burnt to a crisp, but her body felt like it would take time to fully heal. She’d coughed up a little soot and blood in her phlegm before going to bed.

“That nightmare must have been a bad one.” Said Pablo.

“Do you think I’m me.....Really me ?”

Poor Pablo, he looked so worried.

“Forget I asked.....I’m going outside for some air.”

“Do you want company ?” He asked.

“Go back to sleep, one of us needs to get some sleep tonight.”

Olga had revised the original plan to leave by sea, and arranged for a helicopter to pick them up in the morning. No aircon and it was a hot night. They had a fan playing over the bed from the other side of the room. Charlie stood in front of it for a while, letting it dry off the sweat a little. A gown and boots were all she intended to wear and the boots were Pablo's and at least six sizes too big. She clumped out of the room, along the passage and through the front door. Jai was there, sat in a chair with an assault rifle in his lap.

"Everything alright?"

"I just needed some air." She replied.

Charlie walked away from him, following the wall of the house. She didn't want to be near anyone who felt sorry for her, concerned about her, or the worst....In love with her. She was tired and having trouble keeping people's emotions out of her head. The house was a little run down, but there was a garden with a child's swing hanging from a tree. Charlie sat herself in the swing, enjoying the only thoughts in her head being her own.

"You have to let it go you silly bitch." She muttered. "You're you and even if you aren't.....There's fuck all you can do about it."

It had happened to Ruby, it had happened to her once before, that night in Russia. Kallina thought it was all part of her gifts, a reflex action when her physical body was about to die. It was a hot night and the patch of crab grass next to the swing looked so inviting. Charlie curled herself up into a ball on the ground and finally fell into an untroubled sleep.

"Charlie.....You need to wake up."

The face was Kallina's and for some reason she was wearing what looked like a small black evening dress, complete with stockings and heels.

"Oh..... Baba Yaga.....Are you a dream?"

"No I'm not ! Wake up Charlie, Ruby needs you."

Charlotte wrapped the gown round herself, the morning air had a chill to it. She sat back on the child's swing, while rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

"Why does Ruby need me?"

"She's almost ready to dig down through the ground in Uganda. She needs both of us Charlie, there are dangerous creatures in caves below the ground. Will you come?"

"Of course I will.....It happened again Kallina, in Mexico. I was dying and my body was restored, or a new one was created, I'm not sure which. It's worrying me Kallina.....Am I really me?"

"You look real enough to me girl. Are you still having sex with Pablo?"

"Yes."

"Are you still eating, peeing and crapping?"

Charlie could see where the conversation was heading and it was fun to play along with it.

"Yes."

"Can you still see the thoughts of others?"

"Yes."

"Did you have food and a roof over your head last night?"

"Come on Kallina.....Yes, I'm a spoiled brat with nothing to complain about. But it still worries me."

"There is no one who can answer your..... Actually, now I think about it, the Arbiters might know."

"Who?"

"Come into the house Charlie. Over breakfast I have a lot to tell you."

"Kallina.....Why the little black dress?"

"Come on.....I'll tell you while you get dressed."

~

~

© Ed Cowling - October 2020