

## Ruby 2

### Chapter 3 – Charlotte’s Thunder

**“He says we’re not allowed here.” Said Charlotte. “He keeps shouting that it’s forbidden.”**

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Ju-Long had to find the right tools, before he could begin to open the inspection panels on the Jingdao Dragon. The guards were all theirs and the authorities were keeping the public away from the area. The only problem that Ruby had with time, was the exposure to radiation of her and the members of the thirteen.

“Can we help ?” She asked him.

“Perhaps with lifting them away ?” He replied.

Lau was useful, grabbing an edge of an inspection panel and carrying it away. All of them were strong, far stronger than human kids their age. Ruby could see the look of amazement on Ju-Long’s face, as Eugenie lifted heavy titanium panels. Eventually the device was opened up for inspection and it wasn’t good.

“The self-repair module is missing.” She said.

It was a large semi-circle of metal the colour of brass. A complex looking device the shape of a pizza slice, but three feet across. Someone had known modules were missing, they’d fabricated metal guards to cover the holes. Kallina had sketched out several devices, the one in front of her was the worst scenario.

“Can you fix it ?” Asked Ju-Long.

She wasn’t there to fix it, but she wasn’t going to tell him that yet. The aircraft was his pride and joy, his titanium baby. He might turn hostile if he realised that Ruby was there to destroy it. She needed to get her hands onto the diagnostics panels, but the gap was too narrow.

“Can it be lowered a little ?” She asked him.

“I’ll need to get the hoist and it’s normally a four man job.”

“We’ll all help.” Said Lau.

It took another hour to get the hoist in place, unhook the various control cables and remove the dozen or so bolts that held the device in place. It was lowered about a foot and Ruby could see the depression in the top cover. It wouldn’t respond to human hands, but it would respond to her DNA. Ruby put both her hands into the shallow depression and felt the AI respond. Almost immediately the vibrations from the device changed.

“What are you doing ?” Asked Ju-Long.

“Talking to the AI. Please be quiet while I do this.”

It might have been an artificial intelligence, but to Ruby, it felt as though it had been lonely. A highly sophisticated device, left running and badly damaged, for an almost unimaginable number of years. It knew it was incomplete and damaged beyond repair, that was the worst part of linking with it. Like sharing the mind of a creature that had been caught in a bear trap a million years ago and was still gradually bleeding to death. She looked at Ju-Long.

“It’s been in pain for so long.” She said. “I’m going to give it the shutdown command.”

“To repair it and start it up again ?”

He knew, she could see it in his mind and it was upsetting him.

“It can’t be fixed Ju-Long.” She said. “Someone has tried and made it worse. I’m going to tell it to shut down forever.”

"You can't..... they promised..... You're here to repair it !"

"It's not the future." She replied. "It's from the past, a dead end for the technology of the time. Mankind needs to find its own clean power, that it understands. You don't have the metals and circuits to repair this device... you don't even have a vocabulary to understand it!"

He was looking at her as though she was a monster. Ju-Long had finally understood the true nature of Ruby and her group.

"You're them, the ones who built it ! You're not human."

He ran away, heading towards the stairs to get back to the ground level. Lau began to go after him.

"Leave him." Said Ruby. "He isn't going to set off the alarm and put his family at risk."

Ruby put her hands on the device again and felt something close to relief from the AI, as she told it to shut down completely. It had diagnostics it wanted to push into her mind, but she stopped it.

Ruby's mind was still full of crap that Kurt and Kallina had shoved into it. She skimmed through, finding some interesting information about who had been trying to tinker with the device. Ruby confirmed the shutdown order and felt the AI die.

"It's dead." She said. "I felt it go."

"Do we have to blow it up or something ?" Asked Charlotte.

"No, that's it." Replied Ruby. "It's just a useless lump of metal now. We can go home."

It would never run again and no technology of modern man could open it, much less understand how it had produced gigawatts of power for countless millennia. They could go home; she'd even keep her promise and take Ju-Long's family to Vietnam.

"Fuck !" She shouted.

The alarm was going off, she obviously hadn't realised how disturbed he'd been. Silencing the local alarms would be easy, but the army base would already be assembling their three hundred men.

"Lau." She said. "I give you permission to completely ignore my instructions, once a day."

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Max was alone again, listening to an English language station broadcasting from somewhere in Oman. It didn't matter what the programme was about, it was the voices of other people that made him keep the radio on all day. He got down onto his knees and carried out one of his daily rituals. Max put his head about a foot into a hole in the floor and sniffed.

"No smell, nothing." He muttered.

He'd been slowly getting his weight down since realising that Kallina meant to carry out her threat and keep him prisoner forever. Nothing sudden or drastic, just a pound or so a week. The main problem was going to be his shoulders, if he risked the hole. His shoulders were broad and could easily become jammed against the sides.

"Not a well, it has to be an old latrine."

There were old tiles on the floor and they'd been carefully cut, their edges rounded. A well would have the traces of a mechanism to get the water out. It was a hole where countless generations had squatted and crapped, he was certain of it. That was probably why Kallina had never bothered to block it up. Max had been examining and pondering the hole for months, maybe over a year. He knew the deep sewers in ancient Pompeii, still stank of human excrement.

Would any sane person risk being trapped in the dark and up to their neck in centuries of shit ? Max was seriously considering it though. That dark and narrow hole in the floor, might be his only way out. Where did it lead to though ? Nowhere nice probably, probably just a narrow crack in the ground that ended in a cave full of dried excrement. If he got that far, he'd probably end up wedged tight and die of thirst after a few days.

“Am I this desperate ?” He asked himself.

He’d once dropped a small tin of baked beans down the hole. The sort with a pull off lid, Kallina would never let him have anything as dangerous as a tin opener. The tin had bounced off the sides of the hole several times on the way down and then hit bottom somewhere. It was deep and went down at an angle, his hole, the one he was obsessed with. Where did it end up though ?

“No, I’m not ready to find out, not yet.”

Max went back to listening to a radio station in Oman, they were playing an old episode of Desert Island Discs. It was an episode from two thousand and eleven and Danny Baker had just chosen his third record. In a way it was all too normal and made him think too much. He changed the channel to an Arabic station which he could barely understand. That was perfect, it suited his predicament.

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Ruby was pleased that no one was panicking, Lau hadn’t even taken the assault rifle off his shoulder. “There is always more time than you think.” Jurgis had constantly told her. “There is nothing to be gained by firing a whole clip, if none of the bullets hits a target. Be calm Ruby and assess every situation properly.”

A mobster of indeterminate east European origin. Jurgis had treated her like his personal property and her year with him had been quite stressful. She’d cried for him after he’d died, but she’d run for the airport and never looked back. It had been the first time anyone had felt her reading their thoughts and the mobster had reacted instinctively, drawing an old Makarov pistol from his belt and aiming it straight at her. She couldn’t clearly remember his name, but she remembered the confusion in his head and the hate in his eyes.

“Fucking witch.” He’d shouted at her.

She gave him her full blast smile. She’d quickly learned that her gift had a broadcast facility as well as being able to read minds. Ruby looked at him with her dark brown eyes, looking out from under her raven dark curls and gave him complete trust and adoration in a single smile. It worked, it always did. He’d smiled back at her, but the hate needed to go somewhere and he’d put three bullets into Jurgis, one taking off half his face.

Poor Jurgis had died because she’d failed to control a situation properly, but he was still her mentor, lurking in her unconscious mind. She’d drummed the same ideas into the thirteen and it had worked. No panic, no rush to act, definitely no popping off hundreds of rounds at non-existent targets.

“We’ll use the aircraft lift.” She said. “It’ll get us straight up to ground level.”

Lau found the controls without being asked, while Eugenie watched the stairs. It was all like a well-oiled machine and Ruby was very proud of them. Lau thumped a large green button and the huge doors began to roll open. Tons of hardened metal designed to withstand a bomb entering the lift shaft. The doors rolled along their tracks quite quickly and the lift itself was empty.

“No dawdling.” Said Ruby. “No souvenirs, everything has been irradiated, we only take out what we brought in. Everyone into the lift.”

Charlotte dropped something onto the floor and Ruby had to smile. The girl had been around Spider too long and was fast becoming a bit of a thief. The controls inside were at the top of a few stairs and on a raised platform. Lau pressed the button with an up arrow on it.

“There’s no button to open the exit doors.” He said. “They probably open automatically.”

Probably wasn’t a word Ruby liked, if all their lives were depending on something. He was right though and the upper doors slid apart as they approached them. Another two minutes and they were on the surface and blinking in bright sunlight. The lift came up next to a long road that

obviously doubled as a runway when required. It was confusing, they must have travelled north while descending into the building, Factory 88 was a good three hundred yards behind them.

“Sounds like every alarm in China is going off.” Said Eugenie.

It did, the air was filled with sirens, all competing with slightly different tones. Their guards would be at Factory Number 88, the guards Charlotte had turned into their fighters. They were all going to die of course, to buy them a few minutes of extra time. Charlotte had obviously seen her looking towards the factory.

“They were all going to die of radiation poisoning anyway.” She said. “If that helps ?”

“It does a bit, yes.” Said Ruby. “No messing about with the trolley. We’ll run straight to where we left Mei and her kids.”

She saw Ju-Long as they ran, he was sat on the ground and leaning against a factory wall. They were too far away to talk to him and Ruby didn’t feel the need to run closer to him. Time was the main thing now, getting out to sea before a tank and three hundred angry soldiers arrived. They could all run very fast, but that could mean arriving tired and unable to handle any problems they might find. A steady eight miles an hour was fine though and they could keep it up for days.

“I don’t see them.” Said Lau.

The bushes between the utility cabinets were still some way off, but there was no sign of Mei or the crew members.

“Maybe they hid when the alarms went off.” Said Charlotte.

They weren’t there and there was no sign of a struggle or blood on the ground. Ruby was really tempted to head straight for the Junk, but she’d promised Ju-Long to take his family with her.

“What.....exact instructions did you give them ?” She asked Charlotte.

“Nothing fancy, just to protect the kids with their lives.”

“She’s their mother.” Said Eugenie. “They might obey her, if she wanted to move to somewhere more secure.”

Ruby sat herself down, cross legged on the ground. It was the fastest way to find them, even if the damn tank was on its way.

“We’ll find them.” She said. “Sit with me and you Lau, you’re good at this if you try.”

They sat in a circle, holding hands. Ruby cleared her mind and used the strength of the thirteen to locate Mei. Mei should be easy to find, she was dying and scared for her children. That should make her an emotional hot spot in an empty town.

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Tobor was just Tobor, he never gave anyone a second name. He was the best forger in Budapest, which of course, meant he was very good. Forger and fixer, plus a drop off point for any mail that Ruby wanted to keep private. He’d known Ruby during her days with Jurgis, when Olga had threatened to kill her and every day brought yet another drama. Those weren’t good days and Tobor hoped that Ruby chose her lovers better now. He’d hit her once, that bastard Jurgis. Tobor had said a quiet thank you in his prayers when he’d heard that Jurgis was dead.

“Some people are greatly improved by a violent death.” He muttered.

He’d lost money because of it of course, Jurgis had been a good customer. Olga had taken over the business then and had run it far more efficiently. Less drama, less dodgy clients and far fewer deaths by gunshot wounds.

Tobor was owner and manager of Kornél Toys, a famous toy company in Budapest. Only natural materials of course, rarely any plastics in their toys. They also repaired rare and valuable antique toys and operated a world renowned dolls hospital. It all made enough money for Tobor to retire

from his illegal activities, but it was too late. Crookery was in his blood and he enjoyed the excitement. A year or so of leading a nice quiet life, would probably send him to his grave. A member of the mail room staff knocked on the door and put a box down in one of the few empty spaces on his desk.

“From Baku, for the attention of Miss Ruby.”

They left and Tobor examined the box. More from Baku, probably forwarded on by Jalil. Strange how people became part of her trusted circle, without even realising they were working for her, often for free. Tobor loved her like a cheeky niece of course, since she’d come to him with a blackened eye and a bruised jaw. Bastard Jurgis!

He used a razor sharp knife to cut through all the sticky tape that had been used to seal the box for transit. There was bubble wrap to be removed and thrown onto the floor. There were no gaps on the floor, the wrap ended up on top of a broken doll. One day he’d clean his office up a bit, but not today.

“Ahhhh a box of secrets from Kurt Trifonov.” He mumbled. “Rare these days, but always important.” Kornél Toys received parcels from all over the world, toys to be repaired, cleaned or merely valued for insurance purposes. Customs rarely opened one of his deliveries and if they did, they were likely to find a well packed and much loved doll. Tobor lifted the doll out of the box carefully; it was now his, Kurt’s way of saying thank you.

“Oh Kurt, this is exquisite.”

A Russian doll, probably from around eighteen fifty. Tobor would look for a makers mark once he’d found all the right pieces of packing paper. Some in the strips from a shredder, some just scrunched up, the doll had been in a box full of packing paper. There was even a scrunched up menu for a takeaway chicken place in Hong Kong. Some of the scrunched up papers were important though and that meant flattening them all and adding to the litter piles around his desk.

“Don’t go there Ruby, they’ll eat you for dinner.”

A map, with red dots next to certain towns and places. He couldn’t read the language that Kurt and Ruby used, but he recognised the outline of North Korea. Notes now, all in the same version of written lines and bars that resembled Cuneiform. He’d asked what language it was once.

“It’s the language of my people Tobor.”

She’d laughed of course, that tinkling laugh that everyone loved. Strange sense of humour though, at times. More notes out of the box, until it’s empty and gets thrown to the far side of his office. A hazard to any visitors he might have, but Tobor didn’t encourage visitors to his office. He opened a drawer and removed a large envelope. He put Baku on it and a date. All the papers went inside and the envelope went back in the drawer. He didn’t tell her about mail arriving, she was always expecting whatever turned up. Ruby would collect it, or maybe Olga. Sometimes Kallina came to his office to collect the mail, but he wasn’t keen on that one, far too crazy.

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Ruby stood up and pointed along the coast, past the rows of deserted jetties. The others were nodding and looking in the same direction.

“I feel her need for security.” Said Charlotte. “Mei has taken her children home.”

“They won’t be safe.” Added Eugenie. “The soldiers will find them.”

Again Ruby was torn between keeping the members of the thirteen safe and keeping her promise to Ju-Long. He had betrayed her at the end and the soldiers were unlikely to harm the children. Her memory of Jurgis was her guide to such things and he’d have already been on the Junk and heading out to sea.

“You can’t leave them !”

Charlotte was holding her arm, gripping her hard enough to leave a bruise. They both knew the distance they had to run to Mei’s house. The soldiers from the army base were likely to be at Factory 88 by the time they had the kids.

“If we go and get them,” said Ruby, “we may have to kill lots of soldiers. Can you do that ? Can you promise me you won’t freeze up ?”

It was a little brutal, but Ruby had to push her. Charlotte didn’t say anything, she just nodded her head three times. Crap ! It looked like they were going after the kids and heading into trouble.

“You all know where we’re going.” Said Ruby. “Follow me and stay alert ! There are almost certain to be other guards in the residential area.”

They ran, Lau keeping slightly apart from them, the QBZ-95 ready in his hands. It would have been nice to have had Olga with them, but now they were well off the agreed mission plan and winging it. Most of the town appeared to have been evacuated, but they passed the occasional confused looking civilian. One tried to talk to them, but saw Lau’s assault rifle and walked the other way. Apart from being empty, the town looked so normal, there was even a cinema showing ‘Finding Dory.’ A man in uniform came out of an office building and began shouting at them. Ruby had no idea what he was saying, Charlotte was the one shouting back at him.

“He says we’re not allowed here.” Said Charlotte. “He keeps shouting that it’s forbidden.”

They were running past him and there might have been no further trouble, but he opened a holster on his belt and brought out a gun. Lau didn’t hesitate, there wasn’t time for weighing up the pros and cons. He fired twice and the man in uniform was falling over and dying.

“Move !” Shouted Ruby. “Faster !”

Past banks and shops with unreadable names, they kept up a fast pace, until ruby slowed down. It was the edge of the residential area and Mei wasn’t far away. Ruby ran between the houses now, actually climbing over someone’s garden fence. A dog barked at them, but the houses looked to be empty. Over another fence and there’s the sound of gunfire coming from the direction of Factory 88. “They have no idea where we are.” Said Lau.

“Ju-Long might tell them where our boat is.” Added Eugenie.

Once Ruby wouldn’t believe that Ju-Long would put his kids at risk, but he had set off the alarms. She decided to become a little fatalistic.

“We’re here now.” She said. “Let’s get the kids and assume we still have a boat.”

The house looked like any small wooden house anywhere in the world. Ruby didn’t knock, there wasn’t time. She put the palm of her hand against the front door and pushed, hard. It flew down the corridor and she followed it, turning left at the kitchen door. Mei was there, with two very scared children. So were the members of the Junk crew, still alert, one still holding the elderly Makarov pistol.

“Convince her Charlotte and do it quickly.”

Mei looked sick, far worse than someone who still had four days until radiation poisoning killed her. Maybe Ju-Long had been wrong about the prognosis ? The kids were well though and listening as charlotte soothed their mother.

“We’re leaving in one minute !”

“She’s not coming Ruby.” Said Charlotte.

“Then we grab the kids and start running towards the Junk.”

Charlotte was holding her hand, pushing thoughts into her head, making her understand. Ruby knew that Mei wasn't objecting to her children being taken to safety, she just wasn't going to leave her kitchen again, ever.

"Give her the Makarov." She said.

Charlotte took the gun from the crewman and gave it to Mei, knowing she'd use it before the soldiers arrived. No more was said, the children gave their mother a quick hug and they left. Ruby carried one child, while Eugenie carried the other. No fast running now, the crew would never be able to keep up. Great ! A slow jog at best, even more time taken to get to their boat.

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Something was happening in the vicinity of Jingdao Island and the high orbit military satellite changed a few of its lenses and sensors. It wasn't quite in geo-stationary orbit, the globe seemed to drift leisurely past below it. The satellite had a NASA designation and was officially involved in monitoring global warming. Not that any significant foreign power believed that of course, but it helped to get the funding through various committees. In truth Geo-Sat 1148 was a clever spy satellite, which could use any one of its hundred or so sensors, to look at just about anywhere on earth. Once it was given a target, its own AI could decide on the best method to collect and analyse data. Moving to a different orbit brought risks to the one billion dollar satellite, but not a huge risk. High orbit meant plenty of time to correct any problem and Geo-Sat 1148 was extremely unlikely to fall to earth.

Purely by luck, it was approaching the South China Seas and all it had to do was switch to a high definition optical device and examine the ground below. Troops, attacking one of their own factories, it was significant and the satellite passed the information to another satellite that was above Texas. Within two or three minutes, Geo-Sat 1148 was being given fresh instructions.

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Ruby was carrying the boy child and he had his face pressed against her chest. She deliberately avoided the street where Lau had killed the uniformed security guard. The town was completely empty now, even the few curious civilians had vanished. There was gunfire coming from the science park, a lot of gunfire.

"They're delaying them longer than I thought." Said Lau.

As he spoke they could hear automatic weapons firing, accompanied by the occasional thump of something far heavier.

"They probably want to take the factory without destroying it." Said Eugenie.

"Yes." Said Ruby. "That makes sense and it means we probably have time to get to our Junk."

After the cinema showing the Nemo sequel, Ruby took them towards the ocean and along the seafront. It was beautiful and could have been a seaside town anywhere. There was even a round building with pictures of various ice creams. It all reminded Ruby of a grim weekend she'd once spent in Bognor Regis. They were almost back to the jetties, when the ground shook. Ruby stopped and tried to sooth the child she was carrying.

"That isn't from any weapons the soldiers might have." Said Lau.

There had been a little smoke rising in the distance, but the fog of war had largely vanished with gunpowder weapons. Now a large plume of smoke was rising into the air. Hot smoke, with threads of fire running through it. First orange and then red, the fire within the smoke appeared to be still active, even gaining strength.

"Is it the device exploding ?" Asked Eugenie.

"I don't know." Said Ruby. "I don't think so and the smoke isn't rising above factory 88."

“Who knows what else their government had hidden here.” Said Charlotte.

Another explosion made the pavement move under their feet and a few seconds later, another fiery cloud was rising into the sky.

“You’re right.” Said Ruby. “The gunfire, or more likely a shell from the tank, has caused something else to explode. Come on, we need to hurry.”

Lau carried the boy now and Ruby took his assault rifle. She didn’t particular like guns, but she could probably use it better than Lau. Olga had trained her in how to use just about every weapon imaginable and use them well.

“Not far now.” Said Charlotte.

They weren’t far from the beach where they’d left the dinghies; she could see the top of their Junk’s masts, above the bushes. Something made Ruby turn, perhaps the sound of a diesel engine, being pushed hard.

“Down !” She yelled. “It’s the tank !”

They were in the bushes and watching the path, as the tank appeared. Maybe Ju-Long had committed the cruel betrayal of risking his children’s lives, or maybe the tank crew had just got lucky. Either way, the tank stopped and a hatch opened on the top. A soldier appeared, who began using binoculars to examine the countryside.

“He obviously hasn’t seen us.” Said Lau.

“Time to do your thing Charlotte.” Said Ruby.

Charlotte stood up and raised her right hand, as though shielding her eyes from the sun. The hand gesture wasn’t part of her gift, Ruby knew that. She used her hand too, like a mouse pointer, to focus her gift on the target. Charlotte simply stood there in full view, ignoring the activity as the man in the tank saw her. What had he seen ? Just a harmless young girl looking at him, perhaps even making a friendly gesture. He called to someone behind the tank and a soldier came into view and took a long hard look at Charlotte.

Down came her hand, as though she was playing at swatting a large diesel powered, heavily armoured tank. Charlotte brought down the thunder and the tank became a cloud of fire, electricity and burning ordnance. It was like ball lightning, but with intense heat and millions more volts. Where the tank had been standing was now a crater several feet deep. It had all been done in less than a second. Charlotte raised her hand again.

The soldiers didn’t associate the destruction with the young girl, they were searching the skies for some kind of attack helicopter, or maybe a drone. The tank had become fast flying pieces of shrapnel and there were cries from the wounded. Ruby was picking up pain, panic and confusion. Charlotte added to it by bringing down the thunder again. More heat with this one, Ruby felt waves of hot air hit her cheeks. The ball lightning hit the troops, killing several and creating another smoking crater. Charlotte raised her hand again.

Something was still happening close to Factory Number 88, yet another warehouse exploded, causing the ground to shake. It was frustrating not knowing what was going on and Charlotte seemed to take the rising fireball as a challenge, something to be exceeded. Her hand came down and the ball lightning had red mixed with the blue electric crackle. A dozen soldiers must have died, it was difficult to be certain, but they were now aiming fire at the girl who seemed to be guiding the attacks. Charlotte seemed impervious to their bullets and her skin was covered in blue crackling flames.

“Pick up the girl Eugenie.” Said Ruby. “We need to go now.”

“But Charlotte ?”



“Charlotte will be fine, we’ll wait for her at the boat.”

There could be no soothing the boy child; the world was full of death, flames and the sound of thunder. Ruby pushed his face against her chest and began to carry him towards the dinghies. The troops had a target now and there were still enough alive to pose a real threat. Ruby heard a bullet bounce off the ground next to her. Charlotte filled the air with more heat and thunder, just as Ruby heard the bark of a Kalashnikov. A bark caused by poor build quality, but the bark of a Kalashnikov had now become its unique selling point. The Chinese troops actually stopped firing for a few seconds as the 7.62mm bullets slammed into the ground around them. Olga had come to give them covering fire.

Charlotte raised her hand again !

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Geo-Sat 1148 watched most of it, though it was right on the edge of its orbit. The data didn’t fit any known criteria and a human might have written it off. The satellite’s AI didn’t though, it spun a spectroscopic analyser round and caught Charlotte’s next piece of thunder. It aimed lenses at her and pointed a whole host of sensors in her general direction. None of the results made sense, but it condensed it all into a data pulse and sent it to the satellite above Texas. By the time it was given fresh instructions it was too late. The satellite was over mainland China and carrying out routine surveillance patterns.

The Russians picked up the increase in traffic about active insurgency around Jingdao Island. Something big was happening and they took the risk of changing the orbit of a low orbit surveillance satellite. The satellite wasn’t expensive, which was just as well. It slowed down slightly too quickly and burned up in the atmosphere before the error could be corrected.

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For Ruby it all became confusing and slowed down. That seemed to be her minds way of dealing with danger and violence. At one moment Lau was carrying both children, while she and Eugenie fired at the approaching soldiers. A while later and her clearest memory was of carrying the boy again, while Charlotte continually pounded the area with ball lightning. Through it all Olga was there, slightly to one side of them, teaching the soldiers to fear her. It was a miracle that none of them was wounded, or perhaps there hadn’t been that much enemy fire ? Ruby remembered firing at a trooper and watching him fall, but that seemed to be almost a memory of a dream. The sky she remembered clearly, it was always full of fire.

“There can’t be any soldiers left alive.” Said Olga.

Something in Ruby came back into real time and she was alone with Olga, standing next to a dinghy. Her people had taken the children to the Junk and Ruby was just waiting for Charlotte.

“Some will survive.” She said. “Probably more than you’d think. I don’t see them being a threat to us though.”

Charlotte had been bringing down six lightning strikes at a time. Like mighty hammers of some unknown god, her ball lightning had destroyed most of the science park. Ruby was picking up thoughts from a few scared minds, but most of the troopers were dead. The smoke had turned day to night, which would make it harder for anyone still searching for them.

“Should we go and find her ?” Asked Olga.

“No ! She’ll come when she’s finished.”

Ruby had seen the pictures of ruined towns, destroyed by the gifts Charlotte now possessed. In her current state Charlotte might view anyone as an enemy, but Ruby wasn’t going to mention that to Olga. Twenty minutes later Charlotte turned up, naked, her skin covered in dirt and soot. Ruby

quickly looked her over for wounds and found none. She gave Charlotte her jacket and Olga wrapped her fatigue jacket round the girl, as a makeshift skirt. Charlotte only spoke once, as all three of them were paddling the dinghy out to sea.

"I did it Ruby."

"I know, you did well. Tomorrow we'll talk about it."

"I'm not sure if I want to."

"You must, it's important." Added Olga.

"Yes." Said Ruby. "We need to talk through every detail until it feels like one of Serge's little games in his basement."

"Keep it inside and you'll end up like Kallina." Said Olga.

"One Baba Yaga is quite enough." Said Ruby.

Charlotte didn't laugh, but she smiled. The healing was already beginning.

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It was night and they were back in the main sea lanes, before they saw any helicopters. They were all washed, fed and rested by then and back to being an ordinary party of tourists. Four helicopters in the distance and then another four a few minutes later, all heading away from them and out to sea.

"What do you think they expect to find?" Asked Eugenie.

"An enemy aircraft carrier maybe." Said Ruby. "Or a submarine with missiles, anything but a harmless tourist junk."

"We're still on the wrong side of the border." Added Lau.

"They've got bigger things to worry about." Said Olga.

Ruby sipped a strong vodka with ice and sat beside Charlotte. The girl's destruction of the science park had been a little extreme, but it was likely to have destroyed any evidence of them being there, including Ju-Long. She held Charlotte's hand.

"Who do you think they'll blame?" Asked Charlotte.

Ruby thought about it for a good two minutes, before answering.

"No one." She said. "Or maybe the science park management. By the time it gets in the western media, it'll all be a horrible accident."

"The wrong drums kept next to each other in the same warehouse." Added Lau.

"Exactly." Agreed Ruby.

She'd almost forgotten they were leaving with more passengers than they'd arrived with. The children had been bathed until there was no trace of Jingdao dust on them. They were barely toddlers, yet they seemed to sense that something bad had happened to their parents. Eugenie was trying to make them feel loved. There were no clean clothes for them, so Eugenie had used a stiff brush on their clothes. They were quiet of course, as they sat, side by side on the deck.

"What will we do with them?" Asked Charlotte.

"I have no idea." Replied Ruby. "There must be some kind of organisation in Vietnam that will look after them."

"An orphanage?!" Said Eugenie. "They look so sweet."

"They're not kittens Eugenie, we can't keep them."

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