

## Ruby V : Machu Picchu

### Chapter 19 – Half Eaten

**“Half eaten was the phrase Sophie was to use when describing what they’d found. Cal wasn’t the only person to use Limbo as a dumping ground and someone had obviously sent something nasty there, something very nasty.”**

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Cal didn’t just feel tired, she felt totally drained and exhausted. The battle wasn’t over though, she knew that. Far less battle noises than there had been, but there was gunfire not that far away. Mainly, Cal was there to make sure her tent was still standing and the creatures in cages were unharmed. After that she’d re-join the battle until there was no one left to fight, or she died. Her mind could drift in that direction when she was really tired. Even finding her tent unmolested, barely lifted her melancholy mood. Her label stating it was her ‘Research Lab,’ was still in place. There had been visitors though; the canvas door was still slightly open. Easy to have scanned the tent using her gifts, or had a battle spell prepared. Cal did none of those, or any other things she might have done. She entered her dark tent and a flashlight was shone in her face.

“Stay where you are.....Don’t move.” Someone shouted.

They knew where to switch on her battery lights. The tent was suddenly quite well-lit and the captive animals reacted to that. There were quite a few alarm sounds coming from the cages. Three men were in the tent, two carrying serious looking assault rifles. It was the military looking grey haired man who particularly interested her.

“Ahhh, so we’ve found the young lady who destroyed our dumpster.”

The guy she’d knocked out must have described her, or there’d been a camera she hadn’t noticed. How he knew her seemed unimportant. She knew him, being shown his picture was part of their morning routine in the trailer. He looked a little older than his US Army photograph, but it was him. “Colonel Arthur Moore.....There are so many people looking for you.” Said Cal.

“I’m sure there are.....Sorry to borrow your tent, but my Jeep was destroyed. Once my men have wiped out what’s left of Ruby’s rag tag army, I’ll be leaving.”

Surely he had to know he was losing the battle ? His Jeep destroyed and some way from the action, perhaps he had no idea, or he was being delusional. As he’d probably kill her anyway, Cal decided to goad Arthur, just a little.

“So, you don’t realise you’ve lost ?” She asked.

“Shall I kill her, Colonel ?” Asked one of his men.

“No....Not yet.....Watch her hands though.” Said Arthur. “If she starts to make any strange movements.....Shoot her.”

Cal used her gifts and deep inside Arthur’s mind was the mental admission of an informer at the CIA. No wonder Arthur knew what she looked like; he had his own mole in American intelligence. Ruby was right; hire thousands of spies, hackers and assorted malcontents and some were guaranteed to turn on you.

“Ahhh, you’ve a spy in the CIA.” Said Cal.

Ruby had taught her about seed questions to dig out the gems you were looking for. A name came into Arthur's mind, the full name of the mole. Cal had never heard of him, but Ruby's CIA contacts would know who to give the name to.

"Yes, very clever young lady. Tell me, why the animals?" Asked Arthur. "That's been puzzling me since I borrowed your tent."

"Research Lab, it's my Research Laboratory." Said Cal.

"Yes, I get that.....What are you researching?"

It was probably a little bit of luck, though Constanze was bound to turn up eventually. Two armed men waiting to kill her if her fingers so much as twitched, effectively disarmed Cal. Constanze entered the tent and she obviously didn't like what she'd found. A loud cat when in the mood, she let out a roar a Bengal Tiger would have been proud of. The assorted caged small mammals reacted to her roar and the sound quickly became deafening. The two men with Arthur turned and aimed their guns at Constanze. Arthur too, turned and looked in the direction of the cat named after Mozart's wife. Cal was armed once again.

Two words quietly mumbled and a flick with her fingers. The spell was unintended really, but she'd been practising it earlier. Better than killing Arthur and his men, though she could have rendered them unconscious and used duct tape to bind them. Cal repeated the last spell she'd used and the three men vanished, sent to Limbo. There was a slight rush of air, as the atmosphere replaced the air that had gone with them.

"Arthur will be fine there, for a while." Cal muttered.

The enemy had been dealt with and placed in a prison no plain vanilla human could ever break out of. Tiredness hit Cal like running into a wall. She turned off the lights to calm the animals. There was a fold up bed in a corner, though she'd only used it once. Cal curled up on the bed and within seconds, she was fast asleep.

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Professor Ellie Nicholas wasn't sure if she believed Mars had been injured in an accident unrelated to the battle. Still, the girl was all smiles and unlikely to tell her parents a different story, or lodge a complaint with the university. There appeared to have been a few unpleasant incidents and near misses. All that really mattered was that all her students had survived the battle. Ellie wanted to get on with digging test pits and working on their finds. Getting back to normal was her aim and that required a lot of cleaning up.....

"I'm hoping I can rely on you, Todd." She said. "Nature will clean away a lot of unpleasantness. A period of rain is a wonderful cleanser. My students can collect and remove some debris, but they can't be expected to dispose of.....You know what I mean."

Bodies she meant of course, though she hated using the word. Just about everywhere she looked; there was the body of a cult member. The weather forecast was predicting warm and humid, with the occasional shower. Very soon the bodies would become a health hazard.

"That is already being taken care of." Said Todd.

"No burying them here, this is an archaeological site. Eventually someone will dig them up again."

"I promise you, Ellie." Said Todd. "The deceased will be completely removed. And, as you say.....Mother Nature will finish the cleaning up job."

Deceased, what a wonderful word. It almost sounded as though they were dealing with the funeral of loved ones. Ellie had already been told that an intelligence agency would go through the house the Colonel had been living in. It would then be cleared out, as though the cult had never been there. Which agency? Ellie could make a reasonably accurate guess, but really.....She didn't care.

“Thank you, Todd.....I just want everything back to normal.” Said Ellie.

“I know.....There are test pits that need digging.” Said Todd.

“There always are.....There always are.” She said. “I wanted to thank you for leaving Thio to look after me. He saved my life in the early hours of the morning.”

“Yes, Thio did well.....We’re taking him to London with us, when we go home.”

“Good.....And I hate to ask again. I seem to have asked all of her friends so many times today, but is Ruby going to be alright ?” Asked Ellie. “Sophie said it was a serious wound.”

Todd’s expression changed, as had Sophie’s. No matter what he said, Ellie knew Ruby had been seriously injured. It was the look a student gives when asked about a breach of the rules that might get them sent home, but a lot worse.

“Yes, Ruby was seriously injured, but she heals fast.” Said Todd.

“Can I see her ? Can she talk ?” Asked Ellie.

Poor Todd, he looked as though he’d have preferred to be having root canal surgery.

“No, she can’t talk.....But we’re all hoping she’ll soon heal.” Said Todd. “As to seeing her.....Not today, she needs to rest. In the morning though, maybe you can see her in the morning.”

“Don’t just vanish, Todd.” Said Ellie. “I don’t want to see your bus heading up the road early in the morning. Ruby is a friend and I want to see her before you pack up and leave here.....Alright ?”

There was something about a few of them, mainly Sophie and Cal. Little Sophie was the other side of the car park, but Todd looked at her and Sophie nodded.

“Yes.....I promise you will see Ruby in the morning.” Said Todd.

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For Sophie it had been a very busy day and it still had many hours to go. Being Ruby’s eyes and ears was one thing, but being her mouth as well. It was hard work, but in her own way, Sophie was enjoying herself. Disposal of bodies was a chore she’d agreed to split with Eugenie. Cal’s strange research in her tent had given Ruby the idea and Ruby was still very much in charge.

‘Send them to Erşetu, Sophie.’ Ruby had sent into her mind. ‘Let their remains find rest in the dust of that dreadful place.’

Erşetu, an old Akkadian word for the part of the underworld totally hostile to life. Nothing ever left Erşetu once it was there. It was a simple solution and left no trace of the dead at the dig site. How had the ancient Akkadians heard of the place ? That was a mystery for another time.

“Ahhh, this must be my sixth so far.” Sophie muttered.

On her way to Cal’s tent, but she was sending every corpse she saw to Erşetu. There was no real idea of how many dead there were. The only solution was to get rid of the ones she saw and then do a thorough search of the area. Sophie stood a few feet from the body and concentrated.

“Renuff Senvent Erşetu.” Said Sophie.

She hoped the pronunciation was right, despite saying the words several times that morning. The chances to use ancient Akkadian were rare and Sophie liked to be perfect. The two hand gestures she was more happy with. The body in front of her wasn’t intact. An arm was about a foot away from everything else. The spell took everything, including a few pieces of unrecognisable viscera. Even the small pool of congealed blood had gone.

“That was.....Amazing.” Muttered Sophie. “So useful, but so simple.”

It worked on an individual’s essence, which sounded like an Akkadian shaman describing DNA.

Sophie was almost looking forward to finding the next body. No one else might have looked at it that way, but Sophie knew she wasn’t like most other people.

“I just hope Cal doesn’t get.....Awkward.” She mumbled.

Another body not that far from Cal's tent, which Sophie sent to join the dry dust of Erşetu. With luck, there wouldn't be any bodies left in the dig site by bedtime. As for the house the Colonel had rented. Specialists from Lima were coming to deal with that. Any survivors of the cult were likely to end up in an underground equivalent of Guantanamo. Sophie thought the dead going to Erşetu, were probably the lucky ones. Sophie banged on the tent door, until Cal let her in.

"You're late." Said Eugenie.

"Don't be ridiculous, I'm never late for anything." Said Sophie.

They were ready, wearing combat armour and carrying assault rifles. The students were collecting anything that looked even vaguely like military equipment. Todd was offering a bounty, so Ellie's students had collected a staggering amount of weapons and hardware. The Colonel must have equipped his men well, there seemed to be a lot of decent weapons. Sophie took off her jacket and began to put on combat armour. It would be too big for her of course, but it would do the job.

"So.....All three of them were armed and alive, when you sent them?" Asked Sophie.

"Yes.....I'm guessing they'll be pretty angry by now." Said Cal.

"Totally pissed off." Added Eugenie.

"They might see us as their saviours and welcome us with open arms." Said Sophie. "My bet is on them hating us and firing as soon as they see us. Be careful, very careful. Getting pictures of their bodies would be wonderful, but.....If the situation gets nasty, I'll nuke them. Ruby and her new buddies will have to trust us that Colonel Arthur Moore is dead."

Both of them had stopped buckling and tightening various pieces of armour. They were giving her a look that could signal anything from being confused, to being unhappy.

"Alright.....What did I say that was weird?" Asked Sophie.

"We're not going to try and bring them back alive?" Asked Eugenie.

"No, we're going to kill them and leave them in Limbo." Said Sophie. "Will that be a problem?"

"Not for me." Said Cal.

"Fine for me.....It does make things a lot simpler." Said Eugenie.

"Good.....Your spell sent them, Cal." Said Sophie. "Trace where they are and send us close, but not too close."

"Three of us together.....I've never done that before." Said Cal.

"I trust you.....Get us there, Cal." Said Eugenie.

Sophie raised her rifle, with the intention of firing as soon as they saw the Colonel and his two men. Cal said the words and made the gestures and for a moment everything froze. Sophie's next sensation was of a cool breeze on her face. All three of them were in the middle of a field of what looked like crab grass. Not far away, were three men lying on the ground.

"I don't think taking them alive was ever really an option." Said Sophie.

"What the hell did that do to them?" Asked Cal.

"Stay alert, so it doesn't get a chance to do it to us." Said Sophie.

Half eaten was the phrase Sophie was to use when describing what they'd found. Cal wasn't the only person to use Limbo as a dumping ground and someone had obviously sent something nasty there, something very nasty.

"Fuck.....It ate Arthur's liver." Said Eugenie.

"At least his face is recognisable." Said Sophie.

Pictures of their faces on her iPhone, though only Arthur's was still fairly intact. Then pictures of their bodies, which had been ripped apart and half eaten. The soft tissues had gone, the contents of the abdomen and chest.

"I noticed, it had a thing for hearts." Said Cal.

"Maybe a pack of things, we need to finish up and get out of this place." Said Sophie. "Now you see why you must never send anyone here."

"I won't.....I'll free the animals when we get back." Said Cal.

All three of the dead men were wearing dog tags. Sophie photographed them in situ, before removing them to take back. With the pictures and the tags, no one could doubt that Colonel Arthur Moore was dead and his cult was finished.

"Bastard.....I heard he battered his wife to death." Said Cal.

"The cops in his hometown think he killed her." Said Sophie.

Eugenie kicked Arthur's body, which seemed an appropriate thing to do. Cal said the words and made the gestures again. A moment of seeming not to exist and.....All three of them were stood in Cal's canvas research lab.

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"Ouch, are you sure that doesn't need stitches?" Asked Spider.

"Stop complaining." Said Sarah. "Mars is injured and Lily is busy, so you get me. And stop squirming; I've dealt with your wounds before.....These are just scratches."

In a way it was nice to have Sarah cleaning the cuts and grazes on his back and arms. She was used to him; he could curse and moan without her taking offence.

"Your own fault, you should have worn something tough over your shirt." Sarah muttered.

"It was hot and humid.....I was up a tree for hours." He muttered back.

Tree shrapnel he was calling it, cuts and grazes from pieces blown off the trees by countless explosions. Luckily, the wunderkinds remembered where he was, or it could have been much worse. Sarah had already done the most painful part, digging half a dozen splinters out of his back. Now it was wound cleaning time, followed by covering everything bloody with good old fashioned sticking plasters. Large sticking plasters. There was one bleeding wound in his upper right arm though.....It felt worse than the rest.

"This is it, Spider." Said Sarah. "No more getting into fights.....Not if we're going to, you know, bring a kid into the world."

She made it sound as though he picked fights in their local pub. Once Ruby was back home, she'd talked about settling down with Todd. She'd probably go back to delving into minds for George, or Penny. Not a totally risk free occupation, but less chance of picking up a stray bullet. Spider was already making a mental list of his old contacts in the debt collection business. That too, could be a risky trade, but so far at least, no one had ever tried to shoot him. Actually.....There had been that one time, though it was rare.

"Are you really sure that hole in my arm doesn't need stitches?" He asked. "I can't see it, but I know the feel of something that needs closing up."

He yelped as Sarah used a medical wipe with a little too much enthusiasm. Muttering followed, as the love of his life waited to see how much the wound bled. When Sarah tutted, he knew it wasn't a good sign.

"Hmmm, I'd say it's borderline." Said Sarah. "I could stitch it, but you always squirm about when I do it."

"Get it done, Sarah.....Please." Said Spider. "I promise to keep squirming to a minimum."

More of the cold spray and cleaning of the wound that did feel quite deep. It was a design fault really, one he'd mentioned a few times while serving in the British army. If you could get wounded

somewhere, you should be able to see it. After all, a donkey could see all four of its legs at the same time. Spider let out a slight moan.

"Alright ?" Asked Sarah.

"Never better my dear, never better."

Once he'd been stitched up they were going to see Ruby. Sarah had threatened to thump Sophie if she tried to stop her. All in all, it had the makings of a fun afternoon.

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"Wow, another bin bag full of bullet casings." Said Vanina. "At this rate, I'll be able to afford a scooter when I get home."

"Where is home ?" Asked Lily.

"Sometimes Varna, but mostly Sofia in Bulgaria.....My boyfriend lives there."

Lily was beginning to think Todd had worked out his used ordnance bounty a little too quickly, or he'd underestimated how much of it there'd be. Lorenzo and her had kept up a pretty continuous rate of fire. Used bullet casings were coming out of the bunker by the shovel full. Not just bullet casings, the students collecting assault rifles were also talking about buying major, expensive items.

"We'll keep shovelling.....Just keep bagging it up, Vanina." Said Lorenzo.

Vanina was thin and very pretty; definitely not the sort Lily could imagine bagging and lugging about quite heavy bags. When it meant a large payment from Todd though, in US Dollars.....Vanina looked grubby and sweaty, but hadn't once complained.

"Wow, makes you wonder how we moved about." Said Lorenzo. "There's still another layer of this stuff."

"Good.....My mother needs a new cooker." Said Vanina.

The idea was to clear out the bunker of whatever could be shovelled out. They were bound to miss something, which was why Eugenie would crush their bunker before they all got on the bus and left. The remains of the bunker would never look natural, but no one would know what it had been built for. One day an archaeologist would dig up a piece of Peruvian prehistory and wonder why it had 7.62 round on top of it. That would be then though.....The idea was make the place look normal.....Now. Lily leant forward to pick up some of her kit and couldn't help gasping.

"Still hurting ?" Asked Lorenzo.

"Yeah, damned tree shrapnel, as Spider calls it." Said Lily. "I suppose an explosion in a wood is bound to send out high speed wood slivers."

The sliver had ripped through the belt on her jeans, before leaving a gash in her side about four inches long. Not deep, it had been easy to clean, but when she stretched.....New tattoos could have the same effect, but nowhere near as painful.

"Have you got dressings and wipes ?" Asked Vanina. "I can change the dressing for you.....I did it all the time for my little brother."

"Why, what did he do to himself ?" Asked Lorenzo.

"Hmmmmm, I love my brother." Said Vanina. "But give a stupid clumsy kid a skateboard.....You get my drift ?"

"I get your drift." Said Lily. "Yes, I have a bag full of cleaner, wipes and dressings.....Thank you."

Lily took her jeans down just far enough and yes, there was a little blood oozing from under the dressing. Ideally a little quiet, rest and lounging about was called for. Some chance when an entire dig site needed cleaning up in a day. Ruby really did intend to leave the next day. The spray stung, but otherwise....Vanina made a painless job of changing the dressing.

"Impressive.....You must get a lot of practise." Said Lily.

“As I said, my brother is a bit glupav.....Stupid as you’d say.”

Lorenzo was cursing at something.

“Crap.....There’s even more of it at the back here.” Lorenzo muttered.

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Mars hadn’t liked being shot, but it did mean Jim was out there finding military bits and bobs, while she rested in the refectory tent. Actually, she hadn’t really been shot, but being cut by a flying lump of glass, had become annoying to explain. Jim had volunteered to give her half of everything Todd paid him and Spider had given them the prize for finding the mystery tomb. Once she was healed, they were off for two weeks in a decent(ish) hotel with, hopefully, a good pile of spending money. Just thinking of two weeks drinking too much, eating too much and shagging way too much, was making her happy. Jim might not be the one, but they got on really well and he’d do for now. It wasn’t as if two weeks in a hotel bed meant they were engaged or anything. Mars firmly believed the quote about no one on their deathbed, wishing they’d shagged fewer people.

She was alone in the tent, though Tilda had been there for a while. Moody Tilda, who if anything, had been darker and moodier than usual. It was self-service, but Mars was determined to milk getting sort of shot, for all it was worth.

“Can I have another coffee ?.....I did get shot this morning.” She yelled.

The sullen Swedish girl was on duty and seemed to hate the job. Also a student of course....Everyone goes over the top and everyone works, as Jim put it. Annika was the girl’s name, or something that sounded like that. The girl filled her coffee cup from a jug.

“You weren’t shot.” Said Annika.

“It hurt like being shot.” Said Mars.

Cal had come to talk to Tilda and they’d both wandered off together. Mars had no idea where they’d gone, but from the recent gossip and tension, she’d loved to have known. A goodbye tryst somewhere, before Ruby and her friends left for Lima ? It seemed likely. It was half an hour and another coffee refill by Annika, when Tilda returned. She was smiling; the usually dark moody one had actually smiled at her.

“So.....Did you and Cal say your goodbyes ?” Asked Mars.

“Hm.....sort of.”

“What do you mean by sort of ?” Asked Mars.

Tilda just smiled at her, which was beyond infuriating. Everyone in the camp had joined in with the will they or won’t they. Now they might well have and Tilda was just.....Grinning.....No, smirking at her.

“Oh come on.....Tell all, Tilda. I was shot in the early hours of today.” Said Mars.

“You weren’t shot.”

“It hurt just as much as being shot.”

No good, a smirking Tilda left the tent. Another refill of coffee and a very careful and slow visit to the toilet for a pee. Jim arrived back after that, with a pile of US dollar notes in his pocket. He scattered them over the table.

“I found four working field radios.” Said Jim. “Todd gave me all this.....There’s more in another pocket.”

Mars still wasn’t sure if Jim was the one, or if anyone ever was ‘the one.’ They were going to get engaged and married and have lots of kids.....Or break up and end up hating one another. It was one of those options, though she wasn’t sure which.

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There had been explosions and heavy gunfire, all around their bus. No bullet holes, but there were a few gouges and dents that were probably new. Difficult to be sure....As Spider often said, their bus probably had a huge number of un-careful owners in its past. It started first time though and had never let them down. By some kind of miracle, or old fashioned good luck, Mitch had come through everything without a scratch. Desperate for a pee and hungry, they'd let him clean up before moving him to a supply hut behind the new accommodation trailers. Sophie had been worried about putting him back in the bus.

"Ellie worries me, Eugenie." Sophie had said. "She's armed and has actually killed a cult member. She obviously hates Mitch, so let's keep them away from one another."

It made sense, especially as Mitch was probably going to switch sides and work for the Americans. Probably the CIA, though he'd be useful to a lot of federal agencies known by just three letters. Thio had been left with Mitch, even though Sophie had duct taped him to a chair. Eugenie had been tasked with popping in every now and then, just in case Mitch wasn't as tame as expected.

"Hi guys, I come bearing coffee." Said Eugenie.

"Ahh, great.....Someone who talks." Said Mitch. "Your guy here just grunts at me."

"He talks about American football.....For hours at a time." Muttered Thio.

The hut was well lit, though the ventilation wasn't that good. The place was too hot and had the aroma of unwashed bodies and sweaty socks. The chairs looked comfortable though and with luck, Mitch would be leaving with them. If the Americans didn't want him though.....Eugenie didn't want to think about that. Mitch was a twenty two carat arsehole, but now they all knew him.

"Come on Eugenie, play cards with me for a while." Said Mitch.

"Don't, Eugenie.....He cheats." Added Thio.

Despite Mitch's grunting comment, they did seem to be getting on. Or at least getting on well enough to get through the time until everyone was back on the bus.

"I might be back for a few hands later." Said Eugenie. "For now, I have somewhere else to be."

"We'll be here." Muttered Mitch.

The somewhere else was going to see Ruby, who was in her room in the accommodation trailer.

Sophie had warned her that seeing Ruby could be a little....Unsettling.

"Todd said she removed the dressing and let the wound bleed." Sophie had said. "Her head over a bowl, watching herself bleed for hours. You and I might well have bled to death, but Ruby is tough.....And a bit of a one off. She has a chalk board and wrote a message to Todd, saying she was regenerating tissues."

Ruby was a one off, like the other wunderkinds, but different. Changed as a child and given to human parents to raise as their own. Eugenie had been altered when still just a few replicated cells in a laboratory. No family for her, or at least not what most considered to be ordinary. The wunderkinds had all ended up living with Kallina and brought up in a kind of community.

"Enclave.....Sophie always called us the freaky kids' enclave." Eugenie muttered.

Into Ruby's section of the accommodation trailer and Eugenie wondered if she was late. She'd expected Todd to be there, though not Sophie and Cal. Everyone was sat quietly, looking at where Ruby was sat on the bed. Caleb was there, which was a surprise, though he might have been there as Sophie's significant other.

"Thank you for coming, Eugenie." Said Todd. "Ruby can't talk, so she'll either write on a chalk board, or tell Sophie her thoughts."

"Yes, I understand." Said Eugenie.



There was a noise outside and Caleb was at the window, peering through a tiny gap in the net curtains. He had a gun in his hand and Eugenie understood. Ruby was injured and vulnerable and Todd was part of her healing process. Someone was needed in case not quite all the cult members were dead. Caleb had been given the job of being that someone.

"Ruby is healing, though the process is a slow one." Said Sophie. "The idea is for Cal to tap into her Baba Yaga powers, while I use my own healing gifts. As for you, Eugenie ? We need your energy. Add your power into the pot, as it were and.....We should be able to get Ruby well enough to travel by tomorrow."

Eugenie realised what was causing the odd sweet smell in the room. A bloody bowl had been half shoved under the bed. Ruby was unwell, seriously injured. The hurry to be on the move was probably based on Todd worrying about further attacks on the dig site. Unlikely there would be more attacks, but Todd was well trained. He'd probably done a quick back of an envelope risk assessment and decided that Ruby needed to be elsewhere.

"You're welcome to whatever power I can give you." Said Eugenie. "Couldn't Nazili be brought from London ? He's the best healer we have, by a huge margin."

"Already looked into." Said Todd. "Constanze may be able to travel the globe in an instant. But sadly Nazili needs time to prepare for that kind of thing. It's up to us; here in this room.....We're the ones who need to heal Ruby."

"Does Ruby have power we can use ?" Asked Cal.

Todd shook his head.

"No, just getting this far has drained her."

Ruby scribbled on a chalk board and Todd held it up. It just said 'Good Luck' and had an 'R' for Ruby underneath it. Eugenie had been there before, plans and ideas that had to work. This was the worst though....It felt as though they were playing with Ruby's life.

"Everyone follow my lead.....Happy with that ?" Asked Sophie.

"Fine." Said Eugenie.

"Just.....Don't expect miracles." Said Cal.

The problem was that Cal could say that a hundred times, but they were there to perform something close to a miracle. Half of Ruby's face had been shot off, yet they wanted her fit to travel by the following day.

"I'll use my healing gifts." Said Sophie. "Cal.....Begin the change to using the power of Baba Yaga."

No mention of her, so Eugenie assumed he was still on the bench as first reserve. A mauve light illuminated Ruby, as the entire trailer began to shake. It really shook, as though it might be rattled and shaken to bits.

"Hmmm.....Is this supposed to happen ?" Asked Caleb.

"Shush.....Be quiet or leave." Said Sophie.

With no warning, Cal didn't look like Cal anymore. She didn't look like Baba Yaga either, though there were similarities. None of the hairy warts so beloved of fairy tales, or a rat familiar draped over her shoulder. Hard to define, especially in a trailer that was shaking about. Cal looked like a young witch, with the ancient eyes of Baba Yaga.

"I'm passing my healing power to you, Sophie." Said Cal.

"No.....You're stronger." Said Sophie. "I'll give you mine."

"Take mine too, everything I possess." Said Eugenie.

Eugenie felt like dough under a roller, being rolled and rolled.....Until there was little left of her. Sophie looked dreadful, like someone who really had been around since eighteen eighty seven. Ruby though.....She was radiant, positively glowing.

"It's working.....She's healing." Said Eugenie.

Todd was shouting about something and the light illuminating Ruby, changed from mauve to a dark purple. Cal was trying to pull every last bit of energy out of her and Eugenie didn't resist. There was only one way it was going to end, Eugenie passed out.

"That's far better than I'd have thought possible." Said Todd.

Eugenie woke to find Ruby talking. Actually more of a slightly slurred mutter than clear speech, but she was understandable. She was wearing a scarf, sort of draped over the right side of head. There still had to be scars there, which might take a while to heal completely. Ruby held her hand.

"Thank you." Said Ruby.

"I'd advice everyone to not get shot.....I'm not going through that again." Said Sophie.

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Spider liked the idea of a party, though officially it was a goodbye drink, or two. Everyone was there apart from Ruby, who was still recovering. There had been a chance for Sarah to give her best friend a hug and Sarah reported good signs, for someone who'd recently been shot in the face.

"She even managed a few words." Sarah had said.

The party that wasn't officially a party, was being held in the old accommodation trailer, mainly because it had a huge communal lounge area. Mars was there; several students had carried her in and placed her in a comfy looking chair in a corner. Their enthusiasm for carrying her about was likely to end after her third or fourth time of needing to pee. There had even been talk of allowing Mitch to join in the fun, but as Ellie would be there.....Mitch was still in the storage hut. Caleb had volunteered to check on Mitch occasionally.

"Everyone together and having fun." Said Ellie. "There were times early this morning.....I did wonder if things would ever be normal again."

"Make this the new normal, Ellie." Said Sarah. "Have a get together like this every Friday night." "I just might do that."

No one was assuming the cult were finished, even though Spider privately thought they'd never be heard of again. The three active wunderkinds, Sophie, Cal and Eugenie were at the get together, but popping out occasionally to check for trouble. Spider was sure he'd heard one of them walking on the roof of the trailer.

"This is fun, we needed a party." Said Vanina.

As always, the volume of the music was directly linked to the amount of booze being drunk. An hour or so later, the only way to communicate was by shouting. Spider gently pulled Sarah into a dark corner, so they could have a long snog. He knew when his big moment was due; he'd received Ruby's instructions via Sophie. At a few minutes before midnight, Spider turned off the music. He had the attention of a room full of annoyed people.

"Don't worry, this'll be fun, I hope." Said Spider.

"Is it a party game?" Asked Jim.

"Sort of." Said Spider.

There was a huge cheer and Spider had drunk quite a bit. Ruby wanted him to hold a vote among their people, the wunderkinds and their assorted friends and partners. Weren't they all friends now though, even Tilda? He looked at all the expectant faces and decided to change the rules of the vote.

"I've been asked to take a vote.....On something important." Said Spider.

"Yay." Yelled Mars.

They were a good crowd; they'd have probably cheered the opening of a new jar of coffee.

"There are two choices about where we go from here." Said Spider. "We can go straight to Machu Picchu, or....."

"Are we all going ?" Asked Jim.

"No, we're not.....Just Ruby and her people." Said Ellie.

"I've always wanted to go there." Said Annika.

At that moment, Spider understood why Caleb had described his dealing with the students as chaos. His mouth went dry.....Luckily Sarah grabbed his arm.

"It's a party, relax." She whispered. "Let them work at their own pace. Eventually there will be a vote, though it might be after sun up."

Spider lifted his glass and took a sip. It was like magic, everyone cheered again.

"So.....Option one is to go straight to Machu Picchu." Said Spider. "Option two is to go back to Lima for a week to recharge. Then we'll go to Machu Picchu."

"But.....To be clear.....We're not going ?" Asked Annika. "That seems unfair."

"So why are we voting on it ?" Asked Mars.

"I just thought it would be fun." Said Spider.

A really good crowd, mentioning fun received a cheer and was treated as an excuse to open a fresh keg.

"We'll need tellers for the vote." Said Ellie.

"It's just a bit of fun." Said Sarah.

"This is ridiculous." Said Sophie. "We might as well use a Ouija Board."

"I have a Ouija Board." Shouted Tilda.

Chaos was reaching a critical state, Spider yelled for a vote, a show of hands on option one. Then he asked for hands up on option two. There did seem to be a few hands up for both, but it was just a bit of fun. Option one was chosen by a landslide, they were going straight to Machu Picchu.

"Oh....Even for you, Spider." Said Sophie. "That was a shambles."

He hugged her and kissed Sophie on the cheek and a little to his surprise, she hugged him back.

Democracy had won the day, sort of. The music went back on and everyone filled their glasses from the newly opened keg.

~ ~

On the road again and Ruby was feeling a lot better. There had been a goodbye to Ellie, though she'd avoided most people. Everyone would expect a hug and a few words. Her face still ached and all Ruby wanted to do was rest.

"Hey, I'm driving the first leg of the journey." Said Lily.

"Oh, I'm comfy now. Take over after the coffee break." Said Todd.

Why did they argue over it ? It was just driving an old bus. If they looked like coming to blows over it, someone else could split them up. Down the hill and there were a few gouges in the road and a few blasted trees. Signs of a battle, but only if you knew there had been a battle. All the damage could have been caused by a particularly ferocious thunder storm.

"No ! An agreement is an agreement." Shouted Lily.

Ruby leant across the aisle and her voice didn't sound too bad. A bit like she had a cold, but a lot better than the night before.

"Please, Spider.....Sort out those two." She said.

“Will do.”

The first stop was the first café anyone spotted, after being on the road for two hours. Ruby leant back in her chair and drifted off to sleep.

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