

## Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

### Chapter 26 – Plus Eight

**“Nari had been handed the rocket launcher to carry, along with several other essential items of equipment. She knew it was Sophie’s, loved more than anything else she possessed. On the other hand, Sophie wasn’t there to use it. When the fighting started, Nari dopped everything else in a neat pile, but she kept the rocket launcher.”**

Δ

Max Krause had a lot of respect for Baba Yaga, but he still thought they’d both be dead in a matter of minutes. Just the two of them against Ishel and her personal guard. There looked to be about fifteen rogues with Ishel, all heavily armed. It was madness, though deep down somewhere, he’d always thought his day of dying, would be like that. Just a few against many, for a cause, almost any cause would do. He had the boys now of course and Monique. Even though he now had a life worth living for, there was still a part of him that lived for battles.

“You know this is insane, don’t you ?” He asked.

“Of course, it is.” Yelled Baba Yaga.

He definitely fired first, while Ishel and her guards were still simply staring at Baba Yaga. The distance had to be forty yards and he was trying to walk and aim the assault rifle. He’d aimed at Ishel, but managed to hit the left side of the rogue stood next to her. A tall one, even for a rogue and dressed in fancy silver armour. The rogue dropped their weapon, so Max thought he’d hit them in the arm. He was firing deep penetration rounds, so he doubted if they’d be using that arm again. No obvious pain though, no falling down or screaming for a medic. They simply picked up what looked like an energy weapon, in their other hand.

“Well done, you’ve wounded Hemetre.” Said Baba Yaga.

Of course, the rogue called Hemetre fired back at him. There had to be a shield of some kind between him and them, though he hadn’t seen Baba Yaga create it. The energy weapon just made the shield glow for a while and the energy blast never reached him. Max had always known Baba Yaga was powerful, but her next move seemed designed to teach the rogues a lesson in humility. She merely flicked an index finger in the direction of Ishel’s guards.

“Inskar Marak Ellin Sidente.” Yelled Baba Yaga.

She had to be using their own power against them, the vortex of energy up near the edge of space. It was as if the brightest lightning flash in the world, had hit the ground less than a hundred feet away. His eyes screamed to be closed and Max turned away, until the flash had gone.

“Crap.....You nearly blinded me.” He shouted.

There was a crater in the ground where Ishel had been, though he doubted if killing the queen of the rogues, would be that easy. Encouragingly, though probably not for the rogues, there were quite a few body parts scattered about, none of them his. Ishel had to be alive, Max heard her screeching orders. The return of fire was everything, from small arms fire to energy weapons. None of it pierced the shielding in front of him.

“Max.....Cover your eyes.” Yelled Baba Yaga.

As the next lightning strike hit, Max could see the bones of his fingers. Not just through his eyelids, but also through the combat gloves he was wearing. The ground trembled, as another bolt of energy

came down from above. By the time he dared to look, the rogues were there, almost on top of them. Baba Yaga gave a battle cry, as Max aimed his assault rifle. Maybe the screen had simply worn out. Max felt something hit him and he was hurtling backwards. Straight through a couple of bushes, until his back collided with something that refused to move out of the way. Probably a tree, the back of his head hit it after his spine, and Max was out.....When he woke up, a familiar face was looking down at him.

“Max wake up.”

“Max.....Come on Max, you’ll be fine.”

“A fuck off size headache.....But you’ll be fine.”

“Ruby.” He muttered.

“Yes, and it looks like you and Kallina had a fight. One hell of a fight, without inviting me. Where is she ?” Asked Ruby.

Max tried to get on his feet, which was a mistake. The pain in his back was dreadful and Ruby was right. His head felt like a tiny monkey was inside it, hitting his brain with a hammer.

“Oh, I’m going to need a hand, to get standing up.” He said. “As for Baba Yaga....The last I saw of her, she was tearing one of the rogues apart, literally. One of the big rogues, called Hemetre I think.”

Ruby touched his neck and pressed, which hurt a lot, before it felt wonderful. Charlotte helped, by using her fingers on his head, until the monkey with the hammer went away. By the time they lifted him up onto his feet, he was still aching all over, but he could walk. The scene around him was like something out of history, when warriors faced one another with huge swords and axes. Even if the body parts had once been Ishel’s fighters, it was still dreadful to see.

“I take it Baba Yaga isn’t one of the fallen ?” He asked.

“No, she seems to have hit and run.” Said Ruby. “Guerrilla tactics Max, great when fighting an enemy with superior numbers. I’m assuming she left you here, knowing we weren’t far away.”

“Can’t you sense where Kallina is ?” Max asked.

“No, she’s gone dark, probably to make sure Ishel can’t see her.” Said Charlotte.

“I can see Ishel though, she’s shining like a beacon.” Said Ruby. “Her surviving rogues are all with her, heading towards her last remaining bunker. I have no idea why, she’s effectively trapping herself in a hole in the ground.”

“Nothing more we can do here, people.” Yelled Todd. “We’re leaving in five minutes.”

“I want to go with you.” Said Max.

“You’ll have to, there’s nowhere else to go.” Said Ruby. “The marauders have space in their command vehicle. Sophie’s place, she’s helping Spider and Sarah at the moment.

~ ~

Sophie often said she was good at blowing things up. She was, even without a handy rocket launcher. Charlotte was now less of a wunderkind and more like a fire demon. Ruby had been perfecting her crushing and force skills. Sophie had stuck with what she knew best, causing inanimate objects to spontaneously explode. It used a lot of energy and drained her quite quickly, but Sophie could turn a harmless rock into a devastating explosive device. The pieces of the rock became a cloud of deadly shrapnel.

The cloud cover had gone and she could see a rock, an ideal looking small boulder. It was exactly where the unknown soldiers would appear out of the woods, assuming they were soldiers. Sophie was trying to feel hostility, but she picking up nothing, no thoughts apart from a little boredom.

“I’m about ninety percent sure they’re human.” Sophie muttered.

Spider was on his belly next to her, aiming an assault rifle into the trees. On the other side was Sarah, with an old heavy revolver, that she seemed to love. Luca was back near the road, still changing the filthy dressings where Lena had once had a left foot. Einar had informed them he was capable of aiming and firing, so he'd been left to guard them. They weren't much of an army, though Sophie was determined to take a few of the enemy with her, no matter who they turned out to be. They were close now; Sophie could actually hear two of them talking to one another. Sarah grabbed her shoulder.

"Don't do.....Anything." Muttered Sarah. "They're Norwegians.....Army I'd guess."

"Well...That's a relief." Said Spider. "As far as I know, we're not at war with Norway."

"Let's keep it that way." Said Sophie.

Sarah began waving her arms and calling out in fluent Norwegian. Sophie had enough knowledge of three major languages to buy food at a market. Norwegians did speak English, about eight out of ten of them, Sophie remembered reading, somewhere. Sarah had the right idea though. People tend to trust someone yelling at them in their own language.

As they came out of the trees, it was easy to see why their progress through the wood, had been so slow. There had to be at least twenty young men and women in uniform, maybe as many as twenty five. They were all carrying various posts with concrete feet and planks painted with dayglow paint, in stripes. There were even a few rolling what looked to be old tractor tyres. They all looked so young, more like cadets than professional army. All became clear after Sarah had spoken to them. "They've been sent to block the road." Said Sarah. "No civilian traffic in or out. They have no idea why."

"I can see the sense of that." Said Spider.

"They all look so young." Said Sophie.

"All of them are volunteers, one decent rifle for every five of them." Said Sarah. "They're part of the Norwegian Sivilforsvaret, their civil defence. They're a bit pissed off that no one has told them what's going on."

"Ask them if I can leave Einar and Lena with them." Said Sophie.

"Hey, that means leaving me here." Said Luca, as she arrived.

Sophie hadn't thought leaving would cause so much aggravation. Sarah resented being left there as the interpreter for a gang of Norwegian civil defence volunteers. Luca didn't fancy being left behind and neither did Spider. Eventually, Einar and Lena must have heard the commotion. Their three-legged race style of moving actually worked quite well.

"And..... You promised to do something about Lena's foot." Said Einar.

"I said there may be something I can do." Said Sophie.

It was no good, even two of the young Norwegian volunteers were giving her a nasty look. Sophie knew she was going to be stuck there, when Luca shouted at her. Dear sweet Luca, who never even swore about getting parking tickets.

"We all have places we'd rather be, Sophie." Yelled Luca.

"I hate to admit it.....But Ruby will be fine." Said Sarah. "Whether we're there or not, she'll win, she always does."

And there was poor Lena, being supported by Einar. Giving her a new foot had nothing to do with wunderkind gifts, inherited skill from the long dead race who'd lived in the Karakum desert. Sophie intended to use witchcraft, skills she'd been taught by Baba Yaga.

"Alright I'll do what I can." Said Sophie. "No promises.....We need to get a little privacy from our new Norwegian friends. Then I'll get to work....."

~ ~

Ishel felt lost without her advisers. With hindsight, killing Tlal had probably been a mistake. A silly act of violence, which she could never admit was a bad decision. Her rogues needed a leader and good leaders had to be infallible. Baba Yaga ripping Hemetre apart with her bare hands, had been savage and it had occurred in front of her honour guard. Not only had Ishel lost a valued officer in her army, she'd also been shown to be far from invincible. Not only failed at being invincible and infallibility, Ishel was wounded. A bad wound to her back, from a piece of lying debris. Her only surviving friend and warrior from the old days was now more precious to her than ever.

"You need to hide the wound, as much as you can." Said Celli.

Celli, her famed silent assassin, now promoted to Ishel's second in command. Celli had destroyed the first Gallaan reconnaissance team, as if it was just a minor problem. Celli had her faults, but if she said there was a need to appear fit and well....Her guards must have been voicing concerns about serving a wounded leader. There were rumours, which hadn't been verified, that a group of her rogues had deserted. There was a whisper in the camp, that they'd sworn allegiance to Ruby Mason.

"I'll strap up my back, nice and tight." Said Ishel. "Once victory is mine, I'll deal with any dissenters among the guard. For now, they're needed."

"Of course, guardian of our people." Said Celli. "What are your orders?"

"Is there any news about Baba Yaga?" Asked Ishel. "Has she been seen?"

"No, but I did see Hemetre get in at least two good hits with her sword. There is a chance that the witch has crawled away somewhere, to die."

"I wish I shared your confidence." Said Ishel.

Even an army on the run, needs tents and all the usual trappings of an army camp. Ishel wasn't sure if she was on the run, or making a bold tactical manoeuvre. Her army of just over a hundred and fifty rogues, were together in one place. The camp was next to her last surviving bunker and the device which pulled down energy from the rotating vortex. The blue crystal was easier to protect in the bunker, but useless. To use its power to destroy her enemies, it needed to be on the surface. Her engineers were currently working hard to bring it out of the bunker and into her camp.

"Go, Celli.....I trust you to get things done." Said Ishel. "Sometimes I feel surrounded by fools. Chase my engineers and encourage them to work harder, and quicker."

"As you command."

~ ~

Todd could understand that the problem was him. He might be her war commander, sat in his command APC. The problem was that he was also her lover. If it came down to a choice of a decision that was dangerous for Ruby, or a choice that was safer; he'd always choose the safer option. Even if it didn't make tactical sense, he'd go for the safe option.

"Sorry Ruby, you're right." He said. "The vehicles provide protection, but in this kind of terrain....They are slowing us down."

It was a small island and they'd just wasted precious minutes, using the APC to pull a truck out of the mud. Everywhere was muddy, as if the main product of Hadseløya Island, was sticky, viscous mud.

"It's why the rogues have kept ahead of us." Said Alex. "They're on foot and covering the ground faster than us."

"Don't over simplify things, they are faster and stronger than human soldiers." Said McGill.

Everyone was there, dragging essential equipment out of the vehicles. Carrying the extra weight would slow them down, even if Ruby's super kids were loaded up to the max. Todd had to admit it

though, he'd been wrong and Ruby had been right. It wasn't a marginal difference, there was a good chance they'd have caught up with Ishel's rogues, before they'd reached the bunker.

"Don't make excuses for him, McGill." Said Viktoria. "Todd is a grown man. He should be able to take criticism."

"I can and I will, but this isn't the time or place." Said Todd. "We need all the essential equipment allocated to someone who will carry it. You all have ten minutes to make that happen."

"You heard the man, get moving." Added Ruby.

The commotion occurred while he was still making sure everything in the APC that could be carried, was going to be carried. Even Delmar was being loaded up with more than his own bodyweight.

Todd had to stay with the APC, so he only saw everything at a distance. About ten, fully armed rogues came through the trees, holding their hands up. Charlotte was there in a second, her fingers glowing with fire. Ruby followed her and even Max limped over with his assault rifle. By the reaction of Ruby and Charlie, there was nothing to worry about. Nari remained behind Ruby, with electricity leaping across her fingers, but Ruby was actually laughing.

"What the hell.....Never a dull moment with these guys." Said McGill.

"Personally...I hope they're here to swap sides." Said Alex.

The rogues actually bowed to Ruby. Todd wasn't ready to start believing in miracles, but an extra ten fighters, with their kinds of skills. It just might make a crucial difference, at just the right moment.

Todd was ready to begin trudging through the ever present mud, when Ruby returned, followed by the ten rogue fighters.

"They swore an oath to me." Said Ruby. "It seems I now have my own honour guard."

"Sophie will be jealous." Said Delmar.

"Did they bring any news about Ishel?" Asked Todd.

"She's not in the bunker." Said Ruby. "It seems she's going to fight on the surface, in the mud."

"Nasty, but better than digging her out of a hole in the ground." Said Viktoria.

~

~

Nari had been handed the rocket launcher to carry, along with several other essential items of equipment. She knew it was Sophie's, loved more than anything else she possessed. On the other hand, Sophie wasn't there to use it. When the fighting started, Nari dopped everything else in a neat pile, but she kept the rocket launcher.

"I'll make good use of it, Sophie.....I promise." She muttered.

The battleground was nothing but mud, with the occasional tree or bush. A flat area of mud, which favoured neither side. A silly choice, when they'd run across far better ground to get there. No one had chosen it though, it was just the place where Ishel had stopped running. Nari concentrated, trying to pick up orders from Ruby. The comms was still fried, but Ruby had been mentally broadcasting broad brushstroke orders. Nothing from Ruby, though Nari did pick up a whoop of delight from Charlotte. Looking for Charlie, she saw a fireball hit a group of rogues. It seemed it was going to be that kind of battle, attack anyone you didn't like the look of. Great.....That gave her plenty of choices. Nari nearly became an enemy's whoop of joy. As she lifted the rocket launcher, the tree to her right, burst into flames. All of it, a good eighty feet of pine tree, became a mass of flames.

"Bastard." Nari muttered.

She had no idea if the closest rogue had used their fireball skill, but one target was as good as any other. The battle was chaos and when you're up to your neck in chaos, you'd be best off embracing it. Not much in the way of sights on the rocket launcher, just aim, wait for the range finder to beep

and then press the fire button. Nari pressed fire and watched the rocket hurtle over the top of the mud. It missed the rogue she'd aimed at, of course it did. It did however, hit a rogue a bit further back. The resulting explosion was a wonderful cloud of red-hot fire and shrapnel.

"Wow, I can see why Sophie loves these things." She mumbled.

Reloading wasn't exactly intuitive, but Nari managed to get it done. Ruby was now broadcasting to anyone with enough of the gift to hear her. There were specific commands to a few of the wunderkinds and a general order, that was really a statement of intent.

'Move towards the blue orb, we're going to destroy it.'

Nari looked in roughly the direction everyone seemed to be heading, and there was no blue orb. She closed her eyes and felt for the rogues. There they were, many huddled together, but it was quite a distance away. Between her and the main force of the enemy, was a very strange battleground.

Wunderkinds and rogues using their gifts to the full, while the human soldiers used advanced assault rifles and energy weapons. Even some hack and slash going on, as two fighters squared off with swords and axes.

"Come on Nari, get up and get it done." She muttered at herself.

Rocket launcher up on her shoulder, she ran. When two rogues appeared in front of her, Nari used Ruby's favourite, a low power force wall. The rogues weren't likely to be seriously hurt by being tumbled over the ground. On the other hand, Nari could get past them without them hurting her.

Nari had one thought paramount in her mind. She had to survive; her daughter needed a mother.

"Oh.....No !"

No visual yet on Ruby, though Nari had a good idea where the mental shout had come from. Charlotte was upset too, by whatever had happened. Nari almost ran into the rogue who'd just killed Max. Max Krause was indestructible, even Baba Yaga had never managed to kill, him, yet there was his body, lying on the ground. Max had survived numerous assassination attempts and being imprisoned for years, in an African prison. When he'd been a consultant working for the CIA, Max had been the only survivor of an ill-fated raid on terrorists in the Sinai Peninsula. It couldn't be true; Max couldn't be dead. The rogue pulled an axe out of his chest and Nari knew Max would never see his wife and children again.

'Max has gone Ruby.....He's gone.' Charlie was mentally yelling.

No time to aim properly, though the launcher refused to fire until after the range finder beeped. Just as the rogue was beginning a kind of victory dance, the rocket hit them. When the fireball cleared, there wasn't much left of the rogue, or Max's body.

"I got them for you Max, I got them." Nari muttered.

She reloaded the launcher with the last rocket she had. Knowing Sophie there'd be a box of rockets somewhere, but Nari had no idea where they'd be. Once the launcher was useless, she'd drop it and use her skill with fireballs. Her own gifts were good, but there was something about the rocket launcher. Nari could see why Sophie was in love with them. Nari ran on and it was obvious that Ruby's forces weren't necessarily winning. No sign of McGill, but she ran past several dead marauders, including the body of Rosie.

"You'll die today, Ishel." She muttered. "If I have to rip you open with my bare hands and pull out your still beating heart.....You'll die today."

The day was moving on though, there was already the slight darkening of the sky, as dusk approached.

~

~

Sophie hadn't been picking it all up, but she'd heard some of Ruby's orders to the team. It felt terrible not to be part of it. Sophie needed to tune all that out though and focus. Creating something that resembled a useable foot was pretty advanced. Something that was actually usable as a left foot.....That would probably stretch the ability of Baba Yaga. Still...she had sort of promised.

"You're lucky, Lena." She said. "The Norwegians had a full medical kit, with strong pain killers."

Luca was going to give the injections of local anaesthetic, into just the right places. Lena hadn't been happy about it though and she still wasn't happy.

"I told you; I don't want that stuff." Said Lena. "Just do what needs doing, I'll be fine."

A strange attitude, quite rare. Most wounded soldiers tend to want to be given everything, including the kitchen sink. Opioids are your buddy, with local anaesthetics coming a close second. Sometimes though, someone doesn't trust big pharma and their wares.

"You'll be fine." Said Luca.

"No injections means no new foot." Snapped Sophie. "You'll never handle the pain and I'm not going to end up holding you down. Your choice, Lena....Will you have the injections?"

Luca was glaring at her, another lecture on sensitivity was probably on the cards. Sophie had her own ideas on handling difficult people. Sometimes you really did need to be cruel, to be kind.

Luckily, Einar was on her side.

"Come on Lena.....Get a foot to dance on and I'll take you dancing." Said Einar.

"Alright, but I want to be conscious." Said Lena.

"You will be." Said Luca. "The injections are just for the pain."

Sophie gave the anaesthetic a few minutes to work and then it was her turn. No tearing off the dressings, that would start up the bleeding again. Lena had already lost a lot of blood and another heavy bleed, might well kill her. It all had to be done in one flawless move. The magic, the invocation, the witchcraft....Or whatever might be the right name for it. Sophie had long ago realised that it was all the same thing, the skills her ancestors had once used, but were now mostly forgotten. Sophie prodded the bloody stump with her forefinger and Lena didn't react.

"Good....Spider and Sarah.....Hold her for me, nice and tightly." Said Sophie.

Lots of power pulled down from the vortex high above them. Useful having all that energy available, it saved Sophie a huge amount of time. No saying she was starting, Sophie linked in with the spirit of the planet, Gaia some called her. The Goddess of Earth, mother of all life. For a few seconds Sophie was Gaia, seeing through her eyes, able to do the impossible.

"Hold her, stop her squirming." Snapped Sophie.

"Sophie!" Said Luca.

"Don't Sophie, me.....Keep her still."

In some way Sophie would never understand, Lena's DNA was used. New cells were grown and became specialised as skin, bones and muscles. It was all so fast. A foot began to form, which pushed away the bloody dressings. As Sophie stopped being the Earth Goddess, she was amazed to see a perfect foot in front of her. The skin was so pink and looked so new. Like the skin of a new born baby.

"It is done." Said Sophie.

"It looks so.....New." Said Sarah.

Poor Lena, it had to be a shock. From having a stump, to being given a new foot. She just sat there, staring at the shiny new pink skin.

"We need to get her up on her feet." Said Sophie. "What size shoes do you take, Lena?"

"About a five and half, though a five will fit."

“Someone needs to get some spare boots from the Norwegians.” Said Sophie. “You all heard, a five will do, but try for five and a half.....Socks too.”

“I’ll do that.” Said Sarah.

Once toes had been waggled and the foot had been swivelled about, on went the borrowed boots and socks. Lena was lifted onto her feet and her first few steps were considered a success. Sophie wanted to join Ruby, but it was already getting dark. Whatever was happening in the battle, was likely to be over by the time Sophie got there, especially if she had the others with her, slowing her down. It was time to tell them the bad news, which she’d picked up while working on Lena.

“Max is dead.” Said Sophie. “The outcome of the battle is still in the balance and Ishel might soon be coming down the road with her rogues. I suggest we head towards the Norwegian civil defence base, taking their weekend warriors with us.”

No one argued with her, not even the Norwegians. The barrier was left across the road, which they seemed to think was good enough. With Lena limping a little and moaning that her foot didn’t feel quite right, they all headed north.

“Just be grateful you have a foot.” Snapped Sophie.

“Sophie !” Said Luca.

There was just no winning with some people.

~ ~

Charlotte had a better mental connection with Ruby than most. She’d picked up everything about the huge blue orb, probably being a conduit of some kind, a link between the rogues and the vortex of power. It made sense, Charlie could see the column of energy reaching up into the clouds. It was easier to see now that night was approaching. It lit up the battlefield with a yellowish light, which left many areas of sinister shadows. How to get at the orb to destroy it, was one of those things Ruby still seemed to be mulling over. They’d probably have to get past Ishel which was something Charlie was looking forward to.

“I said.....Keep behind me Lily.” Said Charlie.

“The orb, it’s not a piece of their advanced tech, it’s ours.” Said Lily. “I recognise it, though I only ever saw the plans, not the finished device. The UK tech people ran out of funding, the usual story. Gallaan must have obtained the plans and perfected the power condenser.”

Charlie could see the orb clearly, from where she’d dragged Lily into the bushes. It didn’t so much glow as pulse, which caused pulsating shadows. The effect was beyond creepy and made seeing details, pretty difficult. Ishel and her rogues were close to the orb, protecting it, while using it to draw down power. In front of them were layers of invisible shielding. Every few seconds, the shields would part, enabling the rogues to use their weapons and their destructive powers. Electricity bolts seemed to be their weapon of choice. The Russians had suffered the worst. Viktoria was still there, leading her highly trained Spetsnaz, though there seemed to be a lot less of them. As for Olga’s brother Alex....Charlie hadn’t seen him for a while.

“So.....You’re the expert, Lily.” Charlie asked. “How do we destroy it ? The orb I mean.”

“Looking at the plans doesn’t make me an expert. The orb is tough and brittle....Get enough explosives close to it and it’ll break apart. Not a good idea if you’re close to it. You should let Ruby know the bad news. Destroy the orb and all the energy is released. The resulting explosion will leave a crater the size of a small town.”

“Crap.....I’ll let Ruby know.” Said Charlie.



A device that effectively protected itself. Getting close enough to destroy it would be suicide, even if you could get past Ishel, her rogues and the layers of shields. Charlie linked with Ruby and told her everything she knew, which wasn't much.

"Ruby wants us to get a little closer to Ishel." Said Charlie. "Ideally we need to be close enough to get a headcount on how many fighters she has left....You can stay here, if you like?"

"Ahhh, you'll get killed without me there to protect you."

Charlie liked Lily, though she had once wondered if it had been worth all the trouble to rescue her. A lot of people probably go through MI6 weapons training, to never use a gun for the rest of their career. Pen pushers, number crunchers, all destined to work hard, but never needing to fire a single round. Lily though, she was the genuine article, a natural. No one had expected Ishel to use mercenaries, but they kept running into them, in quite large numbers. Lily was good with a handgun and had already sent half a dozen mercs to meet their maker.

"Here we go.....I'll say it again, Lily.....Keep behind me." Said Charlie.

Up on their feet and they were spotted. Two lightning bolts crackled, but Charlie grabbed Lily and pulled her out of the way. Mud of course, the ever-present mud to wade through as best they could. Mud with dashes and areas of red now, as the battle constantly left bloody, ruined bodies lying on the ground. A few assault rifle shots, all going wide and Charlie was sure they'd make it to the next group of bushes. They could have done with Lau; he'd have made a huge difference. And Imran, but Ruby had decided to leave half of the thirteen behind, to get on with their lives. It seemed like a mistake, but hindsight is always twenty-twenty vision. If they lost the battle, at least some of Ruby's wunderkinds would survive. Where was Kallina though? They badly needed Baba Yaga to arrive.

"Charlie!" Yelled Lily.

Unforgivable, she'd been drifting, almost day dreaming. If Lily hadn't grabbed her and pulled, Charlie might have found out the dangerous way, if she really was unkillable. Lily killed the two mercenaries, with her nine-millimetre automatic. Then they were in amongst the bushes and trying to be unseen and unheard.

"Thank you." Charlie muttered.

"Don't lose it, Charlie."

"I won't.....I'm fine now."

It wasn't just daydreaming, Charlie had seen what was left of Alex. No telling Ruby or anyone else, they didn't need any more bad news. Just a torso with no legs, though the face was still there. Charlie was still forcing herself to not react. Poor Olga.....Charlie suspected she'd miss her brother, more than she'd want to admit.

"Somewhere between sixty and sixty-five, rogues." Muttered Lily.

Charlie felt for Ruby and gave her the headcount. It was still a lot, still higher than could be easily dealt with.

'.....I saw her Ruby....I can see Ishel from here. She's wearing red body armour and has hair the colour of fresh rust.....'

~

~

Ruby Anne Mason thought the link with Nazili only worked efficiently for Sophie. All the two-way sending and receiving of equipment and weapons, had been through Sophie. Often, she'd complained about waking up to find her bed surrounded by padded envelopes, covered in aluminium foil. Even long distance communications with Nazili in London, had gone through Sophie. Ruby had assumed Sophie had a unique skill at linking with London and assumptions are often wrong. She had a vague idea that Nazili might be watching things through her eyes, but he hadn't

made a big thing out of it. No shouting orders at her, or telling her a course of action was wrong. After a while, Ruby had forgotten he might be monitoring her.

"It's no use." Said Todd. "We know where we need to be, but it's impossible to get there. If....And it's a big if, we get past Ishel and her guards, destroying the orb will flatten everything on the island."

"Please don't make me give the greater good speech." Said Ruby. "It'll sound so pompous."

She smiled at Todd and he grinned back. They both knew that destroying the orb and killing Ishel, might mean the death of all of them. Todd already had a ruined left hand, after losing three fingers in a fight with a rogue. Nothing Baba Yaga couldn't cure, if she ever showed up. Ruby hadn't escaped injury herself. The battleground was chaos, the seven point six two round might have been fired by a friendly fighter. It had sliced into the large muscle on her thigh, leaving her bleeding and limping. Again, nothing Baba Yaga couldn't heal. Strangely, it was Todd who thought of it.

"Couldn't you ask Nazili for ideas ? You're always saying how clever he is."

"He is, too damn clever sometimes." She said. "I'll see if I can contact him."

Ruby felt a little exposed where they were. She could just about see Ishel in her red body armour, which meant Ishel could see her. No hills, but there was a small crater from where one unknown member of McGill's marauders, had used a large grenade to remove two rogues from the board. Sadly he or she had died doing it. Ruby sat at the bottom of the crater, in the mud. She had her own guard now, eight of Ishel's rogues, or rather they had been Ishel's. There had been ten, until an attack by several of the rogues loyal to Ishel. Ruby knew them, her new guards. She'd known them all, from their time in Africa. She trusted that after taking an oath to protect her life with theirs....They were now her honour guard.

'Nazili.....I need your help. Can you hear me ?'

'I've been working on the problem....Stay where you are....It's arriving soon.'

Todd jumped, as the blue flash appeared quite close to them. The flash vanished, leaving a parcel lying in the ever-present mud. Not a huge parcel and by the way Todd lifted it up, it wasn't that heavy. There were several layers of bubble wrap under the aluminium foil and packing. Todd cut through it all with a knife. There was a cylinder inside all that wrapping, one with two dials and several switches. Todd handed her the strange device.

"I bet it's a bomb." Said Ruby. "Nazili likes bombs. He's probably had it under his bed since he arrived in London."

"Hang on.....There's a note under the kitchen foil." Said Todd.

It was a bomb, a very powerful one. Ruby was no expert, but the yield mentioned in the note was staggering. More than a large enough blast to kill Ishel and her rogues, before the shattering orb brought destruction on an industrial scale. The question remained though; how to deliver her new super bomb.

"I'll have to take it, using my shadow skill." She said. "Once I'm stood next to the orb, I can set it off." They both knew what she was saying and Todd looked horrified.

"Is there a timer on it ?" He asked.

"Yes, but Ishel isn't stupid. If I set the timer, she can simply reset it. The only way to be certain, is for me to set it to explode, immediately."

"Erm.....Can't we jam the timer ?" Asked Todd.

"Yes, we rebuild it.....While more of our people are dying." Said Ruby. "There is only one way this will work and we both know it."

~

~

Baba Yaga had been wounded while attacking Ishel and her guards. Not likely to be fatal wounds, but she'd been pierced by several pieces of flying shrapnel. Add all the damage together and it was quite debilitating. Not that she was complaining. She'd succeeded in leaving Ishel with a deep wound near her spine. Baba Yaga would heal, she always healed. She'd pulled down a lot of energy and in a couple of hours, she'd be as good as new.

"Oh Ruby, you've upset Todd." She muttered.

Kallina was still in there somewhere, though Baba Yaga would probably be in charge for quite a long time, maybe months. Baba Yaga was being the witch of legend, the wild witch of the woods. She was sat in a tree, after making herself invisible and casting a cloak over her presence. If she wasn't so busy, Ruby might have spotted her, but no one else would, not even Ishel.

"The deathless one hiding in a tree.....I can see you all though." She mumbled.

No probing Ruby's mind, that was guaranteed to get her noticed. There was no need with Todd sitting on the ground next to her. Todd's mind was an open book, with his agitation bringing everything to the surface. So, Ruby was going to make the ultimate sacrifice. Ishel would be killed, but so would a lot of those on her side, their side. If Todd got in the bottom of the crater, he might live through the explosion, but his chances were probably about fifty-fifty.

"At least dear Sophie is well away from the madness." She muttered.

Charlotte was there though, busy throwing fireballs at shields that couldn't be burned. Nari might live, she was pretty tough and protected by a shallow slope. It was all going to a matter of luck though. Where people were, what they were doing, when Ruby pressed the button on the bomb.

"Delmar, mustn't forget dear Delmar."

There was no mental link, but she could see his body. Not far from her tree, his body ripped apart by some kind of blast. He'd have cried out in his mind at the moment of death. Someone should have known her sweet boy child had died. Everyone was too busy though, their heads full of the battle and simply staying alive. Delmar had never been one of her favourites. He lacked the strength of Lau and didn't have the skills of Charlotte, or Sophie. Had she neglected his training? Perhaps.....The thought decided her on a course of action.

"I will help you Ruby." She mumbled. "The deathless one is on her way."

~

~

There wasn't even time for a decent final kiss. Ruby used enough of her smile to calm Todd and make him lie face down, at the bottom of the crater. Awful to use her gifts on him, but it was the only way. She put her own body armour over his head and hoped she'd done enough to keep him safe.

"I love you, Todd Pitkethly." She muttered.

Dropping into shadow form was easy, far easier than the first few times. All the available energy helped and her shadow even had enough strength to pick up Nazili's present, the bomb. Very few would be able to see her as the shadow and none of them were human. If Ishel was sat quietly, with nothing else to worry about; she might spot a disturbance in the air. In reality, Ruby knew that she and her bomb, could walk and act, without being seen. After just a few steps, she saw Delmar. Another one of Kallina's gifted children was dead. No time to grieve or even mentally tell the others. Ruby walked straight through the Rogue's and their shields. No looking at Ishel, there was a slight chance she might sense it. Ruby as just a shadow, placed the bomb right up against the bottom of the huge blue orb.

"I'll do that."

Something was wrong, the rogues were reacting, aiming weapons in her direction. The voice.....It was the voice of Baba Yaga. Ruby never saw her, though she felt a hand pressed against her chest, just below her throat.

“Return !” Yelled Baba Yaga.

Ruby was back in her body, lying next to Todd at the bottom of a very shallow crater. The first explosion happened almost instantly, filling the battle ground with fire and debris. The second explosion hurt her ears and eyes, with a blast that picked her up and sent her tumbling across the ground. After being unconscious for a short time, it was one of the young marauders who found her and helped her get to her feet.

“I was right in front of the blast, it’s a miracle I’m alive.” He said.

Not a miracle, though Ruby might have thought that once. She’d been through a lot of tough action though, a lot of battles. Who lived and who died was half down to training and expertise, but the other half was pure luck.

“Have you seen Todd ? Is he alright ?” She asked.

“Viktoria has set up a medical tent.....I saw Todd there.”

Todd was bruised, but being in the semi-sedated state she’d put him into, might well have kept him alive. He’d been relaxed while the blast hurled him across the battlefield. He had a lot of cuts and bruises, though none were likely to be fatal. With the help of two of Viktoria’s people and the marauder who’d helped her, they searched for the missing. Delmar’s body was some distance away, though he was still recognisable. His body was put in a body bag, which would be collected later.

“So.....It seems she could be killed.” Said Todd.

They recognised her body parts from her huge number of tattoos. Some had meaning, while others were of totem animals. They found enough of Kallina to bury, but they never did find her head. It seemed that her body being separated into its constituent parts, really could kill the deathless one.

“It’ll take a while.....Before I believe she’s actually dead.” She said.

“Could she come back ?” Asked Todd.

“From this.....I really doubt that.”

By some quirk of fate, they found Ishel’s head, so there was no doubt about her death. They found enough of her to fill a body bag, though Ruby wasn’t sure if Ishel would receive a burial. She’s upset a lot of people, including a good chunk of NATO. A lot of them would want to see her cremated and forgotten.

~ ~

**~ Foxy’s office – Three months later ~**

“Lily wants to work for you and.....My department has no problem with that.” Said Foxy.

“Thank you, that’s appreciated.” Said Ruby.

“I enjoyed working here, but it’s time to move on.” Said Lily.

After so many grieving people and explanations to those who expected one, it was nice to see Foxy. He hated so much death and destruction, but he was a realist. Despite the cost, they’d won. Ishel and her rogues would no longer be a threat. All eight of her newly acquired rogues had survived, though two were still recovering. Ruby would never say it out loud, but she saw her wunderkind count as minus one for Delmar, but plus eight with the rogues. Things could have ended a lot worse. There was Kallina of course, though Ruby was keeping that in a separate slot in her mind, along with Max and Anna. Lily was with her and Todd, who still looked as though he’d been through one hell of a fight.

“So, are you still going on a hiking holiday ?” Asked Foxy.

“Yes, and Lily will be coming with me, and a few close friends.” Said Ruby. “We’re going to climb up to Machu Picchu and scatter Kallina’s ashes.”

“Is that allowed ?” Asked Foxy.

“Probably not.” Said Todd.

Ruby had always intended to go on holiday for a while and a walking break with Sarah and Spider had been talked about for months. The size of her group had grown a little, but was still quite small. Now there were a lot of people who still wanted answers, including a few Russian generals. Vanishing to Peru for a while, seemed the perfect solution. Not so much running away from trouble, as side stepping it for a month, or two, or maybe three.

“Will you be taking a phone with you ?” Asked Foxy.

“Definitely not.” Said Ruby.

~ ~

~ The End ~

© Ed Cowling ~ March 2023

Book total word count 164,000 or about 543 novel length pages.

The fifth Ruby book will start very, very soon.