

## Ruby V : Machu Picchu

### Chapter 23 – Vista Alegre

**“Who drove which vehicle would normally have caused an epic argument. The sort of row likely to create vendettas and bad feelings that could last for years. Eugenie felt almost disappointed that the whole thing had gone without a single profanity or threat.”**

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Just about everything they needed for their trip to the Nazca Lines had been acquired. Two trucks for some reason, Lily had persuaded her that two large trucks were needed. Two military grade drones too, though their missiles might never be needed. Just one bus though and one motor home, or camper van as some called them. A trailer on the back of the motor home, they were going to look like a film company heading out for a location shoot. Todd had suggested travelling as two separate groups, but that hadn't been finalised.

In the middle of all the semi-organised chaos, Lau had wanted to see her. He'd chosen the restaurant, probably based on online reviews, or pamphlets in whatever hotel he was using. Sophie had wanted to search for Lau and watch his movements. He'd know though and Lau had always been a little paranoid. Given a reason to be paranoid, he might well become a dangerous enemy. For the moment at least, Ruby was leaving Lau in peace, to do his own tourist activities.

“I know this place.....We came here one night, just after we first arrived.” Said Todd.

“La Locanda, I remember.” Said Ruby. “Spider wanted somewhere he could get steak and chips.”

Just the two of them, having Eugenie watching her back would have spooked Lau. Ruby had decided to treat the meeting as meeting someone who usually thought of her as his second mother. Now Kallina was gone, she was his only mother. Todd paid the taxi and they walked into the restaurant.

“Looks like a quiet night.....Have you spotted Lau yet ?” Asked Todd.

“Yes, he's at a table at the back.”

Troubled, but not aggressive, though she was determined not to spend the entire evening looking into his mind. Lau deserved better than that. At various times he'd been shot, stabbed and burned, while fighting by her side on various parts of the road less travelled. They all had, she couldn't think of a wunderkind who hadn't been hurt while travelling with her.

“Ruby.....I wasn't sure if you'd come.” Said Lau.

“Of course I came..... They are quiet tonight and.....We do seem close to the kitchens.”

“Yes, I'll see if they have a better table.” Said Lau.

Another trick, Ruby was determined to eventually write a book on street craft. There'd be a credit to Gérard Villand of course. Change tables and you caused a minor commotion, which was guaranteed to cause anxiety in anyone settled down to watch them. There was no one, she'd have bet her life on it. Plus, the new table was in a far better location.

“Yes, this is better.” Said Todd.

“Spider said he had the best steak here since leaving Ealing.” Said Ruby.

“Quite a recommendation.” Said Lau.

They ordered three steaks and fries, with all the trimmings. Ruby consciously tried to eat local food and use whatever words she knew in the local language. What was the point of visiting new places, if you insisted on eating and talking, as you did at home ? There were times though, when something

like steak and chips, was just right. She drew the line at warm beer though; they ordered a bottle of decent white wine.

"We definitely need to come here again, this food is delicious." Said Todd.

"Proper chips.....As Spider would say." Said Ruby.

Lau didn't seem in a hurry to tell her about his meeting, or meetings with Charlotte. That was fine, the longer they ate and drank as friends, the more of their old bonding would return. When Lau noticed sticky toffee pudding on the menu, Ruby felt layers of anxiety vanish from him. Just three old friends, having a meal with a little nostalgia about it. Wine too, they were on their second bottle. Eventually, Lau did get around to his various conversations with Charlotte.

"We slept together a few times." Said Lau. "I'd rather you heard that from me."

"You're not related, Lau.....Not really." Said Ruby. "You were raised as a group like siblings, but you're not. Each of you is a unique individual, with your own unique DNA. Sleeping with Charlie may have been unwise, but it definitely isn't incest. Is that what's worrying you?"

"It didn't feel right.....We grew up together." Said Lau.

"Whether you do, or don't sleep with her again, is your choice." Said Ruby. "You're not breaking any laws of taboos."

"Please, I.....Can we not talk about this anymore, Ruby?"

"Fine.....What did she try and talk you into?" Asked Ruby.

Lau twitched a little; he'd have made a useless poker player. He saw it as Charlie trying to manipulate him into doing what she asked. Sleeping with him though.....No, Charlie had always been sexually confident and to her, Lau would have been a convenient male body.

"Charlie thinks it would only take a few of us." Said Lau. "If you can walk through walls, there isn't a problem with gaining access to the rich and powerful. She even has a list, the billionaires; political heavyweights.....Even the extreme religious leaders. As for social media; that seems to be run by a tiny number of angry white guys with borderline personality disorders. Get them alone and we'd only need a minute or two to turn them into loyal minions. Charlie even has a timetable for it."

"Timetable for what?" Asked Todd.

"Taking over the world.....Charlotte wants to be the power behind all the thrones." Said Ruby.

Lau was nodding at her and if she was being honest, Ruby had once thought how easy it would be. She had no ambition to rule mankind, but obviously Charlie did.

"Some of the crazy ideas the people at the top come out with." Said Lau. "Charlie wants to calm them down to begin with. The world needs a little sanity at the top, Ruby. After the calm will come the storm. Every mover and shaker, all the great, good and downright infamous. Imagine them all saying the same things, singing from Charlie's song sheet. She can rule this planet without firing a shot."

"Nonsense, the masses would rebel against it." Said Todd.

"Against what?" Asked Ruby. "All the threads they've been nodding at every day on social media. They won't care who puts the food on their table, as long as they're not hungry. No one worries about the men in jackboots until they come for them. Billions of people, only angry if their favourite TV show gets cancelled."

Control the one percent of one percent who held the levers of power and it really was possible to rule the planet. Charlie's plan could well guarantee there'd be no nuclear wars. There'd be conventional wars though. Nothing like small wars to bring a nation together and...The munitions companies employed a lot of people.

“You understand, I can tell, Ruby.” Said Lau. “It’s simple and terrible.....To enslave a world without anyone realising.”

“It sounds like you are on our side.” Said Todd.

“Of course I am, her ideas are terrible, even if they’re likely to work.” Said Lau. “I won’t help you, but I won’t help her either. I’m going to do what politicians are good at. I’m going to sit on the fence.”

Coffee and a brandy each after the meal, it seemed a night when they all needed a little liquid analgesic. Charlie wanted to rule the world and with the gifts she had and the help of a few of the wunderkinds, she could do it.

“Are you going back to Seoul now ?” Ruby asked Lau.

“Perhaps, I’m honestly not sure.” Said Lau. “Don’t forget that Charlie will view you as the only person capable of frustrating her plans. If you refuse to join her, she will do her utmost to destroy you.”

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Spider had talked to Sarah over the phone, about her having a tattoo. An imp, it seemed Lily had one already and Sarah liked the idea of getting one herself.

“Probably round the front, near my collar bone.” Sarah had said.

It sounded good, something to add a little spice when she removed her blouse at the end of the day, or wore a bikini on the beach. He remembered pictures of imps, as tiny demon type creatures with horns and wings.

“Sounds great.....I’m looking forward to seeing it.” He’d said.

There had been talk about Lily getting her wyvern tattoo finished, which he remembered was a sort of dragon. Why not call it a dragon ? Spider had no idea, but if Lily wanted to call it a wyvern, he was fine with it. To be honest, the conversation with Sarah had been on a busy morning and although he remembered the imp idea, the rest had been filed away somewhere in his memory. Sarah and Lily had been doing the gun slinger walk for a couple of days, the walk of someone not wanting to stretch their skin across a new tattoo. Spider had asked about the imp, but Sarah said he could see it when it was ready to be seen.

“Still a bit sore and red, but I guarantee you’ll love it.” She’d said.

They undressed together to go to bed, yet there was no imp anywhere near her collar bone. At the top of her thigh was a dressing though, which she was being mysterious about. Sarah was even keeping the dressing out of the way during sex, which took a certain amount of skill and effort. Spider’s father had been a tall Scottish man, a soldier for most of his life. His mother had been a tiny brown skinned lady of Indian ancestry. As the saying goes, his mother hadn’t raised a fool. Spider had a pretty good idea where the imp had been inked onto the love of his life and the thought excited him. Their last night in Alessia House before travelling to the Nazca Lines and Sarah said the words he’d been dying to hear.

“My tattoo is ready to be admired.....You have to like it.”

Sarah just wearing knickers, while he had on a pair of boxer shorts. She pulled at his arm, leading him over to the bed that they’d slept in so often now, that it was fast becoming sacred ground.

“It hurt a lot, especially when she added the colour.” Said Sarah.

She sat on the edge of the bed and spread her thighs apart. There was a dry piece of gauze, held in place by tape. The white medical kind of tape that almost invited him to pull at it. He pulled at one piece and Sarah gasped.....Somewhere in his head, was the realisation that they were about to have some truly great sex.

“Careful.” Said Sarah.

He pulled at another piece of tape and there was another gasp. Her eyes though, they weren't telling him to be careful. By the time Spider was looking at the red coloured tattoo of an imp, Sarah was breathing fast and her skin felt hot. Come to think of it, he was feeling a bit hot and bothered too.

"What do you think ?" Asked Sarah.

"Brilliant.....I love his little wings."

Kissing the little imp was irresistible and when her thigh began to quiver, he kissed her ink quite passionately. To the right of his face and so close he only needed to turn his head....Was the slight bulge in her knickers. He kissed that wonderful bulge, using his tongue.

"Don't stop.....Please don't stop." Said Sarah.

Sarah had a thing about him pulling her knickers to one side for sex. He had the same aversion too; it felt worse than keeping his socks on. It was as if you couldn't be arsed to fuck one another properly. He pushed her back a little and quickly removed her frilly pink knickers. Wonderful, he could finally kiss Sarah's pussy, getting his tongue in nice and deep. Arms under her thighs to lift her off the bed, just a little.....They were into something that drove Sarah crazy, a routine for making her whimper with pleasure. A routine that had become a must do part of their sexual repertoire. Once she was wet, he kissed, carefully nibbled with his lips and used his tongue for a long time, until he felt her reach whatever climax caused her to make the really loud whimper. Sarah could sometimes be quite vocal, which wasn't a problem at Alessia House. Once, in a cheap motel, the couple in the next room had banged on the walls while he was trying to achieve the desired result. Not easy, but he had managed it.

"Not bad, Rupert Bailey.....Not bad at all." Muttered Sarah.

Sex had followed, quite a lot of deep, hard sex. Sometimes it was like that, with the usual sexual repertoire going out of the window, to be replaced with them going to town on each other. At one point Sarah had sucked at his dick so hard, that he was actually sore.

Spider woke when the sun began to come around the edges of the curtains. It felt as though they hadn't been asleep for long. He still hadn't got over the pleasure of seeing her face on the pillow as he woke up.

"So.....What do you think ?" Asked Sarah. "We got a little.....Diverted."

"Great.....Considering neither of us is getting any younger. The sex was pretty damned good."

"Not the sex you idiot." Said the love of his life. "The imp I meant....Do you like it ?"

"Yes.....Consider him totally examined and approved." Said Spider.

"Good."

Sarah cuddled closer and seemed to be asleep, but he knew what was coming. Early hours of the morning with them both knackered and badly dehydrated. Her mind would be ticking over though and eventually.....She thumped his arm, none too gently.

"Oi, you bastard.....What do you mean by not getting any younger ?"

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Who drove which vehicle would normally have caused an epic argument. The sort of row likely to create vendettas and bad feelings that could last for years. Eugenie felt almost disappointed that the whole thing had gone without a single profanity or threat. Ruby had asked for volunteers to drive one of their four vehicles all the way to Vista Alegre. She'd made it sound like a chore, rather than something to fight over. By the time Eugenie had been chosen to drive the newer of the two trucks, no one even muttered about it. Lorenzo was going with her of course and he'd be the backup driver for when she was tired. There would be overnight stops at wherever they could find lodgings, but it

was still going to be a long journey. Close to six hundred kilometres as the crow flies. Easily a two to three day journey for their strange assortment of vehicles. Especially if you were determined not to exceed the speed limits. The big exciting thing about it for Eugenie ? Their truck had been fitted with a tow ball to take the trailer containing the drones, once Snowy had assembled them.

“Wow, you do realise I don’t have a licence to drive this brute, even a fake one ?” Asked Lol.

“Neither do I.” Said Eugenie. “If we get pulled over by the cops, a smile should do the trick.”

Ruby had hired the trucks from a guy Lily had discovered. Hired back after Ruby had effectively bought them outright, with a buy-back option. A complicated idea that meant the trucks had their genuine number plates, but weren’t traceable to Ruby. It was the morning they were to leave Lima for an unspecified period and so much still needed to be done.

“The front and rear cameras work fine, I can see everything.” Said Eugenie.

“Are we going to be controlling the drones ?” Asked Lol.

“In theory.....I bet Todd is on the phone all the time, if we need to launch them.”

“Launch.....I love that.” Said Lol. “Sounds so much better than take off, or release.”

Yes, they were both getting a bit excited. Eugenie a little calmer than Lol, but still hoping they’d need to use the drones’ missiles.

The second and slightly older truck, was being driven by Caleb. Unsurprisingly, his backup driver was Sophie. Despite all the cynics, their relationship looked likely to last for a while. There were even rumours of them eventually living together in Paris. The two trucks were leaving before the others in the bus and the motor home. They’d also be staying at a different set of serviced apartments. If there was trouble with the police in Vista Alegre, not all the vehicles would need to be abandoned. Eugenie’s phone made the sound to indicate a text message.

“Caleb says they’re ready to go.” Said Eugenie. “Everything done that needed doing ?”

“We’re fine, good to go.” Said Lol.

A quick message to Caleb and they were on their way to Vista Alegre. Eugenie liked driving trucks, up there, looking down on most of the other vehicles. She’d once driven a Russian army truck on the truly dreadful roads of North Korea. That had been long before Lol had been in her life and she still didn’t have a licence to drive trucks.

“Damn....I left the pastries in the kitchen.” Said Lol.

“You what ?.....We’re going back for them.”

There he was, waving the bag of pastries about, with a daft smirk on his face. Only what the local supermarket had on the shelves, but they’d both become addicted to them.

“Never.....Ever do that to me again.” Said Eugenie. “I’m sure I had mild palpitations.”

Eugenie turned right, heading out of Lima and taking the main road east. It was going to be a long tough drive, but she was looking forward to it.

“What do you think it means ?” She asked. “This finding our way home in Kallina’s journal.”

“Could be anything.....Just so long as I don’t lose you.” Said Lol.

There was that smirk again, though she knew he meant it. There were a lot of non-human emotions in her mind, but she felt the same way about him. She gave him her version of his smirk.

“Don’t worry, you won’t.....I’ve no intention of going anywhere.” She said.

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Snowy hadn’t opened any of the crates and boxes during the flight on an RAF transport plane, or while on the smaller plane for the final stage of the journey. Of course the UK government wouldn’t hand over military drones to a gang of fighters from an unrecognised political group. There were a few in the intelligence services who openly called Ruby’s people terrorists. Luckily there were still

some like Foxy, who could see that Ruby might have some strange friends, but she always seemed to be on the side of the angels, the good guys. Snowy was currently in a hut, somewhere not that far down the highway from Vista Alegre. One of several large huts....Actually sheds was probably a better description. Large sheds used by farmers during the harvest season, though that was a few months in the future. For now, Snowy had the shed to himself, Mervyn Newman his assistant and a daunting number of crates, boxes and packing cases. Actually, not really that daunting.....Snowy knew what he was doing; he was Foxy's expert on such things. Even Newman didn't look that daunted and he was supposed to have been on hiking holiday with his family, in the Cairngorms. "We may as well begin." Said Snowy. "We'll start with crates AB one, through to AB twenty." "They said there's a nearby town." Said Newman. "I was hoping we might get a meal before we began."

"Come on Mervyn, we'll eat once we get the crates opened and checked." Said Snowy.

"Yes, sir.....Of course."

At the moment, Snowy was in possession of a hell of a lot of spare parts and upgrades. Still a little morally grey, but not illegal to transport across the world to someone in Peru. True, the spares would soon be assembled into a couple of working and highly dangerous drones, but for now, they were still nothing but spares. It would take an expert to look at the contents of the crates and know what they could become and such experts were pretty thin on the ground.

"Ruby again is it ?" Asked Newman.

"Yes.....When isn't it Ruby Mason ?" Muttered Snowy.

Poor guy, Janice, Mrs Newman.....Had probably given him hell for missing their annual trip to the Cairngorms. Once they had something that looked vaguely like the first drone, he'd treat Newman to the best meal, wherever they were, had to offer. The trailer was due to arrive in the morning, straight from Bakersfield which had nothing to do with Bakersfield, California. Coming from Bakersfield was a generic description, which meant just about anything provided by the CIA, NSA, FBI, or any of the other numerous federal security and law enforcement services. There was even one called the ATF, which dealt with tobacco and firearms. It all seemed a lot of duplication of services to be paid for by the long suffering taxpayers, but then again.....Snowy didn't pay taxes in the USA.

"Did you want two XB4 nozzles ?" Asked Newman.

"Yes.....They bend easily, so we'll leave them a spare."

People like Newman were worth their weight in gold. He'd asked quite a few questions, but none of the embarrassing ones, like who Ruby might be attacking with UK, supplied drones. Some American parts in the drones of course and a surprising number of bits fabricated in China, of all places. Not that the Chinese knew what they were making parts for. One stainless steel nozzle looks much the same as another. There was the sound of a vehicle pulling up outside.

"That'll be the trailer from Bakersfield." Said Snowy. "They're early.....Go and put a paw print on their forms, Mervyn."

A standing joke, nothing was ever signed for, ever. Newman went outside and there were a few raised voices, as Newman told them he had no intention of putting his signature on their paperwork. They'd leave the trailer; no one had ever taken their toys back home. A few minutes later and the large main doors of the shed, were opened. In came three tough looking guys, wearing the kind of jackets favoured by security services personnel. Newman was with them, saying where the trailer needed to be left.

"Ahhh, brilliant.....It's the series five with the upgraded electrics." Said Snowy.

One of the men had shoved a clipboard at Snowy, but they left without a signature. Poor Newman, it had been almost a day since they'd had burger and fries at an American Airforce hub somewhere in Nevada. His slightly daunted look, had been joined by long suffering. The last thing Snowy needed was an assistant with a long suffering expression for the rest of the night.

"That's it.....I thought they might be early." Said Snowy. "Where are we Newman ? You had the map and instructions to find this place."

"Marcona, sir.....They brought us in to San Juan Airport."

Another huge plus with Newman, was his understanding that his boss was often too engrossed in his work, to remember where they were. One bright young man had begun to look at him with a constant worried expression. He hadn't lasted long in the job.

"Before we do another thing, Newman." Said Snowy. "We're going to find somewhere to eat and buy the best meal Marcona has to offer."

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Todd wondered why he'd been so keen on driving their old bus. The motor home had a wonderful seat for the driver and the power steering made tight corners a pleasure. Best of all was the aircon, a nice plus if you were heading for somewhere called the Nazca Desert. The trailer full of digging equipment on the back made driving at speed a bad idea, so he was keeping well below any speed limits. Not that they were in a race to reach Vista Alegre. It was how he and Ruby had once talked about their vacation to Peru. Just the two of them in a top of the range motor home. Then a few close friends had been invited and after that.....Things had become a little complicated. His phone beeped at him.

"Lily wants to stop for coffee." He said.

"Why not.....We are on vacation." Said Ruby.

It had become a joke saying for the entire group. Quite quickly everyone would get fed up with it, but for now, it always evoked a chuckle. Lily was driving the bus, with everyone in it who didn't have a place on any of the other vehicles. Cal was in the motor home with them, so Lily probably just had Thio for company.....And Constanze of course. Sarah and Spider had hitched a lift in the truck being driven by Caleb. Todd sent a message saying coffee was a good idea.

"Oh, we're not stopping again ?" Asked Cal, with a deep sigh.

"I'll buy you the biggest slab of cake they have." Said Todd.

That cheered her up; Cal was beginning to get a thing about cake that bordered on addiction. Lily indicated a good fifty yards in advance before pulling into the car park of Los Conchesus. It was the sort of place they'd all become used to. A restaurant in the evening, which catered for the coffee and nibbles market during the day. The Peruvian equivalent of motorway services, without the astronomical prices. Todd had no idea what Los Conchesus meant, but it had to be a local restaurant chain. They'd seen quite a few of them in Peru.

"Some sort of soda and cake I think." Said Cal. "I've had too much coffee lately."

"I never drank coffee, until I met you guys." Said Thio.

Back from the road a little, the restaurant was airy and clean. A waitress who smiled and laughed at his appalling Spanish. After their food arrived, Constanze turned up. Todd had seen the ancient feline appear, as if by magic. One moment just the tiled floor, then abracadabra, a large grey cat was stood there.

"I'll see if they have something with tuna in it." Said Cal.

No one seemed shocked by a cat appearing, which was strange. Or was it ? Cats were the kind of creature to surprise you by being where you hadn't expected to find them. It seemed they did have

some kind of wrap with tuna in it. Scrape off the small amount of sauce and Constanze had her second, or maybe third breakfast. The smiling waitress had to like cats, she wasn't telling them to take their pet outside. Everything was perfect, until Charlotte walked through the door.

"Crap.....We've got company." Said Lily.

"I'm not picking up hostility, I'll talk to her." Said Ruby.

To Todd it seemed absurd that Nazili had trouble appearing where he wanted to be on the globe, yet Constanze could do it with ease. Now Charlotte was added to the small group of teleporters, or whatever they called it. They weren't technology; the wunderkinds were like him, organic. He understood that, but still wished their gifts sometimes didn't feel, so downright illogical. Ruby joined Charlie on the stools at the counter, in what seemed to be a friendly conversation.

"Are we in trouble ?.....I have a gun in my pocket." Muttered Thio.

Todd almost told Thio off for carrying a firearm without permission, but remembered that he too, was carrying a nine millimetre in his jacket pocket. Out of all of them though, Cal was probably the most use against someone like Charlie. Todd counted to ten and decided he was required to be the calming influence. There was a strange feeling before he spoke, as if the entire restaurant was brightly lit for the tiniest fraction of a second. A few other customers had noticed it too and were looking around.

"Was that.....Are we being attacked ?" Asked Thio.

"As long as they're both smiling at one another, I think we're alright." Said Todd.

Cal nodded at him, but he could see her fingers moving, creating a spell of some kind. Sending Charlie to limbo was one thing, as long as Ruby wasn't sent with her.

"No Cal, none of Baba Yaga's spells unless we're desperate." Said Todd.

"If you want Cal calm.....We need to order more cake." Said Lily.

It worked, on all of them. Maybe sugar had the desired effect, or just the act of ordering it. By the time Charlotte left and walked across the car park, everyone seemed calm again. She went between two high sided vans and never came out of the other side. Todd was beginning to realise gift envy was a real thing.

"Hey, I wanted more cake." Said Ruby.

More coffee, even for Cal and they just about ate every cake under the glass cover on the counter. Definitely the sugar making Todd feel a bit warm and fuzzy, though it probably wasn't doing much for his chances of keeping diabetes at bay. They were outside and unlocking their motor home, before Ruby said anything.

"It was fine, Charlie was fine." Said Ruby. "She just wanted to see if we needed her help in Vista Alegre."

"What did you tell her ?" Asked Lily.

"I hope you told her to get lost ?" Asked Cal.

"I did, of course I did." Said Ruby. "With luck, we'll have no more trouble from her."

Ruby held his arm, pulling him away from the motor home's door, as Cal went inside. She was obviously fully healed now, judging by how easily she was pulling him away from the door. No words from her, just an obvious need for them to have a few moments of privacy. She didn't stop tugging until they were behind one of the high sided vans.

"Sorry.....But Cal could hear a pin drop, in China." Said Ruby. "I agreed a truce with Charlie, just a truce. We've both agreed to no hostilities until I'm back in London. We are at war though, Charlie went on and on about a formal declaration of war.....You know Charlie."

"Yes I do.....Will the truce hold ?" Asked Todd.



"I see Lily heading our way." Said Ruby. "Being brief, yes it will. I've known Charlie for a very long time and if she agrees to something, she always honours the agreement. Besides, I saw you notice it.....I quickly showed her a little piece of the Fire God. Qalalu Karwancho is still inside me, at least a piece of him is. I can't properly explain it, but it scared Charlie."

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The middle of the third day on the road, after two nights in fairly grim motel style accommodation. Sarah was glad that Caleb had decided to drive a little faster, to make sure they reached their accommodation in Vista Alegre, well before nightfall. The serviced apartment might not be the Ritz, but it was guaranteed to be far better than a motel with lots of weird stains on the carpet and someone else's pubic hairs in the shower. Sarah had outgrown her love of sex in seedy places. These days she craved cleanliness and a comfy bed. A little privacy too of course.

"Oh, more text messages." Muttered Sophie. "How did I end up as the person everyone sends texts to?"

"They know you're efficient." Said Spider.

Sarah exchanged a look with Caleb, that confirmed he realised what was going on. Four vehicles with more people in them than Sarah could easily count in her head. Plus, Ruby seemed intent on adding new members to their group, even if only temporarily. Everyone needed to keep in touch and for some reason, all the messages for their truck, were arriving on Sophie's phone. For a naturally solitary, quiet soul like Sophie, it was hell. Someone had realised that and had decided to wind her up. Others had joined in and.....When Sophie finally realised, someone would be in huge trouble. "The bus and mobile home are an hour away from their accommodation." Said Sophie. "The other truck is three hours behind us. They actually stopped to visit an arts and crafts fair."

"Oh, that sounds interesting." Said Spider.

Sophie wasn't an introvert, or at least not that much of one. She just viewed the world through a different set of rules to most. After all, her DNA wasn't totally human. The look she gave Spider....

"Interesting.....They're three hours late." Snapped Sophie.

"I think we all need to get out of this damned truck." Said Sarah. "A meal, fill up the fridge and then a decent night's sleep in a bed with no weird stains on the mattress."

"Oh yes.....Hey, that's our place." Said Caleb. "Just like the pictures on their website."

There was a lot of construction work in the area and plenty of accommodation for builders and people in trucks. There was enough space in front of the apartments for a dozen trucks. It had been agreed to call the managing agent for the keys and she was there within a few minutes of being called. Originally Sarah and Spider were going to be lodged in Ruby's apartment, but there was a spare bedroom with a fantastic view.

"Can we stay here, with you guys?" Asked Sarah.

"Yeah, of course you can." Said Sophie. "If Ruby counts as my second mother....I think that makes you my aunt. Always room to put up my aunt Sarah and her fella."

There were times, when Sarah wanted to hug Sophie, until the girl could barely breathe and it was one of those occasions. The fridge and kitchen cabinets were filled up from a store less than ten minutes away. By the time they were enjoying Pizza and all the trimmings at Pizzería y Heladería Solfer, the collective mood had changed from irritable anxiety to one of general optimism.

"If only the messages would stop." Muttered Sophie.

"Turn it off until morning.....They're winding you up." Said Caleb.

"Yeah.....When you find out who, I'll hold them down for you." Said Sarah.

"Bastards." Muttered Sophie.

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Construction work meant a lot of people working strange and often long hours. Many were in serviced apartments and probably only used the fridge to store beer. The result was Vista Alegre becoming a delivered food town, where you could get just about anything at just about any time of the day. There was even a bakery that would deliver cakes until well into the night. Pizza, burgers, local Peruvian food.....Ruby even found a place online that delivered vegetable and butternut jalfrezi, with rice and all the trimmings.

"If there's a Thai place I may move here." She'd told Cal.

"Found one.....Best Thai green curry in Peru, according to their website." From Todd.

They'd arrived late and it had taken a while to get the keys to their short term apartment. No one had fancied shopping, let alone cooking anything. So, Ruby had suggested getting food delivered. She hadn't expected the cornucopia of fast and delivered food, which flourished in Vista Alegre. Spider was their undisputed king of the takeaways. Ruby had an image of him in her head, refusing to leave town when everyone else went home.

"It all smells so good." Cal had said.

"And cheaper than in London." From Todd.

Typical Todd, though Ruby refused to let him ruin the vibe. They'd ordered everything from Jalfrezi to Thai, to Pizza and a few other things in between. There was even a large cake in a white box. Just as they were about to plate everything up, Snowy called. Not urgent, he just thought she might like to see how things were progressing. No need for any special gifts, the tone of his voice told her that Snowy was in need of a little validation and a friendly face. Oh, and Newman was there too. "Grab everything, including plates and cutlery." She'd said. "Snowy is in need of a visit.....Cups too, we'll get some beer and wine on the way."

Todd drove and they used their old bus rather than the new swanky motor home. The bus felt like a little bit of home and everyone seemed to have become immune to the funky odour. The cat turned up, of course she did. It was becoming impossible to separate her from Cal.

"Is Snowy having problems?" Asked Todd.

"No, he just sounded a little.....Forlorn." Said Ruby. "Plus, I'm sure he must be hungry."

Ruby really hadn't realised Snowy senior had died, which was making her feel a little guilty. There was no full names on anything from Foxy though and nothing was ever signed. Snowy was Snowy, without anyone telling her Snowy Secundus had taken over his dad's role in Foxy's part of the intelligence community forest. Snowy was even developing the hereditary trait of having his hair go pure white by the age of forty.

Snowy and Newman were just scribbles on yellow paper, that was shredded after being read.

Newman had found some supposedly unobtainable parts for their ancient Antonov and she never had thanked him. If it was a him? Yes, she'd heard Foxy use a few male pronouns when talking about Newman.

"We did go out for a meal, but.....It all smells wonderful." Said Snowy.

"There's cake too.....It looks delicious." Said Cal.

"Oh, you brought a cat with you." Said Newman.

It was like a medieval feast in a large shed and eaten off a wooden bench.

"Thank you for all the crates we received in Baku." Said Ruby. "We'd never have kept our plane flying without them."

"That old Antonov.....The people we pestered for spares." Said Newman. "Some of them came from a Russian admiral in Vladivostok.....No questions asked of course."

“Imagine Foxy having to sign off on the payment.” Chuckled Snowy.

Beer and wine helped the party atmosphere and what looked like a wedding cake in the box. Too much icing really, but everyone had some. Ruby finally looked at the two part built drones. One actually looked like a drone, but the other one was still just a pile of parts on a bench. It’s wiring hanging out if it, made it look a little horrific, like a gutted cyborg.

“Best there is.....We even had the Americans leave you plenty of fuel for them.” Said Snowy.

“Another day and they’ll be ready.” Said Newman.

“I don’t see the missiles.” Said Todd.

“Under the tarpaulin near the door.” Said Newman.

Ruby pulled back the tarpaulin cover and there was something about all weapons of war, that feeling of barely constrained lethality. There had to be designers somewhere, who deliberately made such terrible weapons, look exciting and.....Cool.

“More than I thought.” Said Ruby. “My people will need training in loading them onto the drones.”

“We’ll make sure they’re as expert as we can make them.” Said Snowy. “You’ve got a lot of destructive capability there, Ruby.”

No warnings about using the missiles as a last resort, or even asking who the target might be. Foxy trusted her, which meant Snowy respected and trusted her.

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