

Ruby 3

Chapter 22 – A Long Way Down

“The young man was fresh out of a detention centre somewhere and willing to do anything for a little cash and somewhere to sleep. Eugenie sat next to him without asking, feeling him tense.”

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Malou hated wearing glasses and her eyes were fine for most things. It was age, she accepted that. In a few years she'd need a pair of glasses or contact lenses to function. The drawing Eugenie had just put on the table had been done in soft pencil on cream tinted paper.

“No, I'll need a magnifier to look at it properly.” Said Malou. “Tell anyone you've seen me use it and I will be quite annoyed.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” Said Eugenie.

“My lips are sealed.” Said George.

The magnifying glass she took out of a drawer was an antique. Heavy and several inches across, it had been given to her by a friend who'd seen her squinting at the articles in the Sunday papers.

Malou tilted the drawing to get the best light from a window, before running the glass over it.

“Oh, there's no mistaking that face, though I need to be a hundred percent certain.”

She ran the magnifier over the face she recognised, until there was no doubt.

“I thought he was dead, though a few ex-members of the DGSE have used death to their advantage. Only a death of convenience of course, as an attempt to lose over persistent enemies with a grudge. Mainly those who've worked in Algeria, where agents have been burned and covers deliberately blown. Algeria wasn't our nation's finest hour. I heard a group of former OAS assassins had sworn to find him and give him a slow death. His name is Gérard Villand, or at least it was. By now he could have changed his name a dozen times.”

“Sorry, there are holes in my knowledge.” Said Eugenie. “Who or what were the OAS?”

Malou had to share a look with George. Once she'd have prayed for a day when the OAS were such a dim memory that someone asked who they were. Now it had happened, she felt slightly sad.

“The OAS were the Organisation armée secrete.” Said Malou. “George and I have both had run-ins with their people in the past. A right wing group who felt betrayed by the French government.

Mainly over Algeria, though they had other agendas.”

“They even tried to assassinate Charles de Gaulle.” Said George.

“So they did and they came very close to succeeding.” Said Malou. “They wielded real power in the sixties, so most of their senior people are either dead or quite elderly. Not all are harmless though and they had plenty of money. Some passed the torch onto their sons and daughters. You can still find them at right wing meetings to this day, extolling the virtues of the old Imperial France.”

“And these people wanted Villand to be killed?” Asked Eugenie.

“Oh, they wanted to see a lot of people killed, though nothing came of most of their threats. Some people were thought to be at serious risk though and one of those was Villand.” Said Malou. “He worked for several organisations within the French security services. He was good at getting results quickly, as long as you weren't too worried about the means. Violence was usually part of his repertoire, and death.”

“British intelligence hired similar types.” Said George. “They called them Scalp Hunters. If this Gérard Villand has set up a team to watch the hotel, it sounds like very bad news.”

“It is, very bad news.” Said Malou.

“I’m sure I could follow one of his minions back to his lair.” Said Eugenie.

“Then what ?” Asked Malou. “We can hardly kill a paid agent of the security services.”

“Would this Villand be useful ?” Asked Eugenie. “Is what’s in his head worth bringing him over to our side ?”

“I really can’t see him swapping sides Eugenie.” Said Malou.

“My dear Malou, you are seriously underestimating my powers of persuasion.”

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It wasn’t just the rotating ring of energy high above the clouds, which meant their mining camp would be of interest to a lot of people. Almost like a pointer for anyone interested, Ruby had pulled down a column of energy to dig the first of two holes in the soil of Uganda. No need to tell everyone to keep back, once the energy began to turn pebbles and rocks into red hot projectiles. Steam too, super-heated steam created from the usual moisture in the soil. There was enough spare energy to create a screen for the four of them, the powerful beings pulling prodigious amounts of power from the upper atmosphere. As for the others around them, who were there effectively as gawpers ? Ruby had to smile as Spider and Sarah backed away to quite a distance from the hot hole she was burning through the soil and rocks.

“Sophie, take whatever power you need to protect us as I dig.” Shouted Ruby. “All my concentration will be needed to keep the hole straight and true, until it hits the water.”

“Get further back.....Much further.” Yelled Fabio.

Everyone was having to shout, vaporising the ground tended to be a noisy activity. Kallina was in her head, giving her facts and figures on the amount of available energy. There was enough, more than enough to dig the two tunnels she’d planned. With luck there’d be enough energy left over to incinerate the few Nagala who survived.

“Keep us safe Sophie.” She projected into Sophie’s mind.

“I will.”

The words digging, mining or tunnelling, weren’t accurate descriptions of what Ruby was doing. They were just the usual vocabulary of those who dug holes in the ground and they gave people a good idea of her intent. Ruby pulled power from the spinning ring and used it to burn a hole in the ground. It was more like making a wound in the ground than digging, a wound cauterised by heat greater than the surface of the sun.

“The satellites will be on the way Ruby.” From Kallina.

“I know.....Just give them your best profile.”

Many nations had spy satellites of varying degrees of quality and effectiveness. As always, the major powers had the most expensive and reliable toys in space. The Americans in particular had an automated system to look for any evidence of nuclear weapons activity. Not just nuclear testing. If anyone ever became so pissed off with a neighbouring nation, that they decided to use a few nukes.....The American satellites would be there out in space, recording the aftermath. Ruby had heard the Americans still had India and Pakistan as the top bet on their most likely to cause Armageddon list. No one was giving out a list of what the American nuke detectors looked for, though extreme heat generated quite quickly had to be high on their list. Ruby and her wunderkinds had attracted the attention of the superpowers on at least three previous occasions.

“.....It’s Anna.....Crap..... Her eye...”

It sounded like Todd yelling, or maybe Rory, the noise of the tunnelling was making it hard to recognise voices. Anna had to be the one to get hurt, after arriving late. That problem had to be dealt with by others though, at least for the time being. Ludicrous amounts of energy couldn't simply be put on pause.

"Anna looks quite bad." From Charlotte.

"We'll do our best for her as soon as we can."

Ruby saw the amount of debris flying into the air, as she pulled more and more energy down from the spinning vortex. She'd told everyone to move further back, several times. Now it seemed Anna had paid the price for not listening.

"Wow.....You hit something solid." From Tlal.

Was Kallina giving everyone the ability to get into her head? It was useful at the moment, though it might be confusing and dangerous if there was a serious problem. Ruby had felt the sudden rush of heat coming out of the hole, she knew there was a serious amount of solid rock to be burned through.

"I'm going to increase the temperature." She said.

No one was going to use the vertical shaft, it didn't have to be perfect. Using more energy would increase the speed of descent, even though it might create faults in the surrounding bedrock. So far there was no sign of the forces she was letting loose, having any effect on the Great Rift itself. One of her many priorities was to keep it that way.

"The extra heat was a good idea." From Kallina. "The rate of descent.....It's like an express elevator."

Ruby could feel where the energy was melting rocks to create a shaft deep into the ground, she just didn't have an exact idea of depth. She'd know when that amount of energy hit cold underground water, they'd all know.

"Fabio, are you in this linkup?" She asked.

"Yes."

"Tell everyone to run to where the vehicles are. I think we might get a lot of super-heated steam.....Quite soon."

"Will do."

They'd all be changing orbits of course, all the dozens of spy satellites currently orbiting the Earth. Some would be slowed down too fast, or accidentally moved into a low and decaying orbit. The superpowers would get their pictures and data from Uganda, but it might well cost them several millions as satellites burned up in the atmosphere.

"I need to concentrate." Said Ruby.

She hoped the others would realise it was a request to shut up, without her having to say it. Ruby used more and more energy, pushing the column of power faster and faster through the ground. Her eyes had been closed for a while. She opened them and everything seemed to be glowing. Once her eyes became used to the brightness of the column of energy, she saw that many of the nearby bushes were on fire. No use asking for them to be dealt with, she'd just told Fabio to send them away. No real problem, Sophie would make sure the four around the hole in the ground were shielded from the flames and heat.

"I can feel rumbling under my feet." From Charlie.

Ruby kept pushing the energy down into the ground, even after she too felt the vibrations. When it came the outpouring of steam and loose rocks was like a sudden detonation. Rocks were pulverised against Sophie's energy shield, or Ruby would have been seriously injured. She could hear Charlie chuckling in her head.

“Never does anything by halves, not our Ruby.” From Kallina.

No stopping though, the column of energy needed to dig down a little further if her plan to deal with the Nagala was going to work. Steam seemed to be blotting out the stars, leaving them with the dazzling white light from the column of energy. Still Ruby kept using more and more energy, until an internal timer told her she’d created a vertical shaft that was deep enough.

“It is done.....Charlie....Please help me wind the column back into the vortex.”

“Alright, but I’ve never done that before.”

“Neither have I, we’ll both be learning as we do it.”

Tricky and the potential for incinerating large parts of Uganda, was a constant concern. Ruby used the extra senses she’d never fully understood, as the clouds of steam made her eyes useless. Slowly but surely, she and Charlotte wound the energy back into the spinning vortex. Once it was finished she wanted to collapse, curl into the foetal position and sleep for at least a week. No time for such self-indulgence though, there were things to be done. One of those things was the main tunnel, which needed to be over two miles in length.

“Well done, I’d have said returning power to the vortex was impossible.” From Kallina.

“Every drop of energy is needed and precious. I need a quick rest and I’ll see how Anna is doing. You and Tlal need to keep the ring turning while I’m gone. Add a little more power to it too, if you can.”

“I think we can manage that.” From Tlal.

If there was a deliberate edge to Tlal’s comment, Ruby was too tired to want to hear it. She took Charlie with her, stumbling through the mist, until they were out from underneath the cloud of steam. Only then could they look around and see the devastation. Hopefully it didn’t reach as far as the settlement, though their new friends there were bound to be affected by it. It looked like every tree and bush had been burned to the stem, or had its leaves boiled off by the steam.

“We’ve created a kind of hell.” Said Charlie.

“Nature will repair and recover, it always does.”

By the time they reached where the vehicles had been left, a temporary campsite had formed. Everyone likes comfort if they can get it and the group of wunderkinds and humans had setup a small home away from home. When they found Rory, he was looking up at the spinning vortex of energy.

“Half of Africa will be sending someone to look at your handiwork.” He said.

“Luckily it will take them hours to get here.”

“We might see a few aircraft passing overhead before dawn.” Said Todd.

“By then we’ll be deep underground.” Said Ruby. “How is Anna?”

“We did what we could, which isn’t much.” Said Rory. “I’ll show you, we put her on a bed of memory foam in the back of one of Doc’s vehicles.”

Anna was out cold when they opened up the back of the four by four. There was a bloodstained bandage covering her left eye.

“We cleaned the wound, gave her broad spectrum antibiotics and enough sedation to knock out a horse.” Said Rory. “She needs a proper hospital.”

“How bad was her eye?” Asked Charlie.

“Her eye’s gone, destroyed by a rock fragment. There’s even some damage to her eye socket.”

Ruby put her hand out, touching the poor woman as she slept. Poor Anna, who she’d rescued from a gang prison in Tallinn, only to get her almost blinded in Uganda. She looked hopefully at Charlie.

“What do you think Charlie.... Can we do more for her than a hospital?”

“Hmmmmm our gifts tend to be more aggressive than healing. These Arbiters are more likely to be able to restore her sight if anyone can.”

Carrying a heavily sedated Anna down a two mile long shaft into the ground. It sounded no more crazy than some of the things they'd done in the past. It sounded far saner than getting on a train heading into North Korea.

“Alright we'll take her.” Said Ruby. “Can your people rig up some sort of stretcher we can carry Rory?”

“We can, we're rather good at things like that. Have you finally decided who will going with you?”

Had she? Not really, there was always the worry that any humans she took down the tunnel to the sacred stone, would be killed quite quickly by any surviving Nagala. It was too late to think like that though, far too late.

“Everyone will be going Rory, everyone who can walk and fire a weapon.”

“Including me?” Asked Doc.

“Yes Doc, that includes you.” She said.

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“I've no doubt your plan will work.” Said Malou. “There is a chance though, a very strong chance that Villand will kill you.”

“I accept there is a risk, but I think it's a tiny one.” Said Eugenie. “I don't think he'll just have me killed and dumped somewhere.”

“Oh, my dear child.....Can you hear what you're saying?” Asked George.

They were beginning to annoy her now. Her plan was a good one, yet they were talking to her as though she was a child, about to try something foolish. The mistake had been to discuss the care of Seong with them, should the worst happen.

“As I was saying George.” She snapped. “I'm certain Gérard Villand will want to talk to me in person. He'll want to know what I may know and he'll be naturally curious about the note I intend to send to him.”

“At least ask Ruby to send someone to help you.” Said Malou.

“No, they're all needed in Africa and besides, there is a need to act quickly.”

Eugenie stood up, as if daring them to try and stop her. The worried look on their faces made her want to reassure them.

“I just need to say a few words to him and I'll be safe.” She said. “A smile will do at a pinch. Don't look so worried.”

“You don't know this man and his reputation.” Said Malou.

“I'll be fine.”

It was lunchtime and one of Villand's people always arrived to look the hotel foyer over at around lunchtime. Eugenie left Malou's office, before their worries began to make her question if the plan was a good one. There was a very real chance that rather than being curious, Villand might become scared of what Eugenie might know. Fear made people unpredictable.

“I'll be fine.” She muttered, while using the freight elevator.

Eugenie was known to all the staff, walking behind the reception desk didn't cause anyone to question her. A quick kiss on the cheek for Nari's child and she walked across the main floor of the entrance hall. A lot of people sat drinking coffee, or nibbling at various pastries. Only about half of those people would be staying at the hotel, the others would be using the facilities to meet business contacts, or romantic liaisons. One or two of the women would be escorts meeting clients. Malou tolerated such things as long as it was only one or two.

“Everyone has to earn a crust.” Malou had told her.

It seemed a fairly decent philosophy to Eugenie. The young man on his own, drinking the hotel’s very expensive coffee, didn’t really fit in. Someone had made the effort, giving him a smart looking suit and a decent haircut. Everyone in the hotel who saw him wouldn’t look twice, except for Eugenie. She could see deeply enough into his mind to know he was another of Villand’s recruits. The young man was fresh out of a detention centre somewhere and willing to do anything for a little cash and somewhere to sleep. Eugenie sat next to him without asking, feeling him tense.

“Don’t worry, I’m not with the police.” She whispered. “I’m not with anyone official, you have my word.”

That was it, a few words and a slight smile when she finally managed to get eye contact with him. He wasn’t totally hers, he still had a lot of freewill. Sending him back lobotomised might scare Villand enough for him to send an assassin next time.

“I want you to deliver a message to Gérard Villand, though you might know him by another name. See.....I put his real name under this drawing of him.”

She carefully unfolded the paper she’d carefully folded up in Malou’s office. The young man knew Villand, she could tell by his reaction. Another name was coming up in the man’s memories, which was likely to be Villand’s latest alias.

“Will you deliver the note for me ?”

Another smile and Eugenie actually touched the back of his hand. Not a full whammy, but she had to be certain he wouldn’t just drop her note in the street, or rip it up. She’d put her name on the back and requested a meeting. She’d asked him to send someone to pick her up at eight that night. It had felt a little cheesy as she’d written it, but she was certain someone would come for her that evening. “I will.” Said the man.

She let him go without immediately following him to the door. When she did look out of the front windows, he was peddling away on a fairly elderly looking bicycle.

“Villand seems to love his young people on bikes.” She muttered.

Not that Eugenie knew how old Villand was, neither did Malou, not exactly.

“He attended protests as a young man in the late sixties.” Malou had told her. “You can do the math from there to now.”

Gérard Villand had to be in his late seventies, maybe even eighty. Not that age seemed to have affected his mind or his organisation skills. She felt Malou heading her way, long before she heard the question.

“So..... It’s done then ?”

“Yes, I’m sure someone will be waiting for me in the street at eight.”

Malou looked at her and nodded, which was preferable to telling her to be careful for about the tenth time that morning.

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The heat in the vertical shaft had dropped, but steam was still pouring up into the sky. Sophie could see it obscuring the Milky Way, as she stood and watched Ruby prepare to melt a two mile long tunnel into the ground. No one was guarding the original shaft. A huge hot hole in the ground was just about theft proof, so everyone was currently at the second mining site.

“The delay is your fault.” She said to Ruby. “Oh yes, you had to go and describe a Nagala to Todd. Now look what you’ve done.”

“I didn’t know he’d go all.....Over protective. And anyway, I never really concentrate on pillow talk, it sort of spills out.”

Todd had freaked out and spoken to Rory, who in turn had been in contact with someone high up in the British security services. The result was the arrival of two state of the art antitank guns, complete with tripods and plenty of ammunition. Todd was currently hammering metal pegs into the ground to hold the tripods in place. They'd already had a fairly old tech guide by wire antitank missile system, which Todd was going to use. The general consensus was that if all that lot couldn't take out the odd surviving Nagala, nothing could.

"I'll still be creating a shield to protect you four." Said Sophie. "Fabio will be making sure the gun crews aren't baked, boiled or crushed."

At least Ruby had the decency to chuckle. Rory and the other soldiers still didn't seem to understand, or appreciate her sense of humour.

"I just wish they'd hurry up." Said Ruby. "Can't Anna get them moving, she's good..... Crap, for a second there I forgot."

"It's not just you, we're all used to her rushing about.....Do you think the Arbiters will be able to give her back some sight in that eye?"

"If they can't, no one can.....Here she is now. They have to finish mounting those fucking guns."

Anna was brought over in the back of a jeep. The drugs had worn off, so Charlotte had allowed her to feel the pain for a few minutes, while talking to her. It had looked cruel until it was obvious Anna no longer felt any pain at all from the dreadful wound. Sophie wasn't sure if Charlie was still one of them, but she admired her skills.

"Come on, we have to get this finished.....Tonight." Ruby was yelling at Rory.

"I feel like a fifth wheel."

It took Sophie a moment to realise it was Anna talking. The stretcher crew had put Rory's homemade stretcher on the ground, right behind where Ruby was going to stand. It didn't look it, but Anna was going to be in just about the safest spot in Africa.

"You'll be the only human going with us through the portal." Said Sophie. "That hardly sounds like you're a fifth wheel."

"Thank you, hearing that really helps."

"I'm pulling down energy in ten minutes." Ruby was yelling. "Everyone needs to be finished and on their way somewhere safe when that happens."

Todd was yelling back at her, though Sophie thought Ruby had been patient for long enough. They'd be up there above them by now, the satellites looking at everything from a low orbit.

"Will I be alright here?" Asked Anna.

"Yes, of course. You'll be near Ruby and protected by me. I promise you Anna, not one tiny piece of rock dust will hit you."

"Thank you."

As the vehicles drove away, Kallina, Charlotte and Tlal took up their positions around the ordinary looking piece of ground, where Ruby was going to assault the Ugandan ground with mind boggling amounts of raw energy.

"It's almost show time Anna." Said Sophie. "I can send you off into a deep sleep if you like?"

"No, I'll close my one good eye if I get scared, but I want to be awake."

Sophie moved back a little, but she was still close enough to keep a watch on Anna.

"Alright, we're doing it all again." Shouted Ruby. "This time we won't stop until we've created a tunnel just over two miles long."

Sophie thought when Ruby pulled fire from the sky, it would arrive at the same angle she wanted the tunnel to be. It came straight down though, turning the ground into a glowing hot rubble in seconds. After less than a minute there was the start of shaft going down into the ground.

“No one boiled, crushed or baked Sophie.” She heard Ruby say in her mind.

“Not even a bit dusty.....I promise.”

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George Polandrous had been surprised when Eugenie had got on so well with Dana and Giles, his close protection people. Normally Ruby’s gang of super kids were like chalk and cheese with anyone even vaguely connected with law enforcement and that included private security. The wunderkinds had been pursued and persecuted for years and tended to view all cops and security personnel as people best avoided. He’d been pleasantly surprised when Dana’s offer to take a turn looking after Seong had been accepted. Even Giles was warming to her, though he suspected her of a little skulduggery.

“I lost twenty dollars to Eugenie at poker last night. I’m sure she’s cheating.”

Giles had told him that morning, while George was having breakfast with Malou at what was becoming ‘their’ table in the dining room. There had been no hesitancy when he’d asked them to follow Eugenie when she was picked up outside the hotel at eight.

“She’s a friend who I think may be in over her head.” George had told them. “Keep your distance of course when you follow her.....You’re just there to call the authorities if things look serious.”

They were pros; they knew what he meant by serious without asking lots of questions. Even the normally taciturn Xue had taken a shine to Eugenie and Seong. He had a few friends in the same business as himself. Professional drivers with reliable vehicles and an expert knowledge of the streets of Paris. They were going to provide Dana and Giles with different vehicles and drivers as required. It was a great way to look after Eugenie without her knowing it. Nothing could go wrong.

“Why are you both still here, she left the hotel twenty minute ago ?”

There they both there, with Seong’s carry cot on the floor between them. Dana looked at him, before looking at Giles and rolling her eyes.

“She’ll be alright George, she knows what she’s doing.” She said.

“You think you’re helping, she knows that.” Added Giles. “You’ve got to leave her to do what needs doing. It’ll be fine.....You’ll see.”

She’d got at them, he should have seen it coming. Not a full whammy, or whatever Eugenie called it, they didn’t have the glazed expression he’d seen on some people Ruby had given her special smile.

“Snap out of it, the pair of you.” He yelled. “Find Xue, there might still be time.....Hurry !”

No good, Dana actually held his hand, as though he was a child.

“We know you’ve been stressed lately George.” She said.

“Relax George, everything will be fine.” Said Giles. “We’ve all noticed you haven’t been yourself.”

Fuck ! Eugenie had gas lighted him and he really should have anticipated it.

“This isn’t over.” Shouted George. “Once this wears off, we’re going to have a serious conversation about who pays who to do what in our relationship.”

There was that annoying roll of the eyes again, as the couple looked at each other.

“Whatever you say George.” Said Dana.

No good, it was like trying to reason with people who’d overdosed on Prozac. Xue would be different, he’d been through too much to let Eugenie get to him with a smile and a few honeyed words. George had been trying to avoid Eugenie to stop her picking the well-meaning conspiracy from his thoughts. It looked like that had given her the opportunity to noble his troops.

“Not Xue, never Xue.....He didn’t break under torture by the Chinese.” He muttered

There was a small private garage at the rear of the hotel. It was where Lauren Bacall was rumoured to have been put in the trunk of a car to get her past waiting paparazzi. It was also where an injured Ruby had been gently helped into an estate car, after the incident with Henri Gervex. Xue was waiting there, running a chamois leather over his car’s bonnet.

“Xue old friend, I’m sorry the others have let you down.” Said George. “Come on, we can still find Eugenie with the help of your friends.”

George had the back door open to Xue’s spotless luxury saloon, when he noticed his old friend wasn’t moving.

“Come on, we need to hurry.”

He knew his plan had irrevocably fallen apart, when Xue hugged him. It had been one of those days, so George hugged him back.

“She’ll be fine George. She does understand though, we all do. You’ve been under so much stress lately.”

“You too Xue, you too..... Somewhere deep down you must know Eugenie has got to you, don’t you ? That girl has well and truly gas lighted all of us.”

Xue moved back and looked at him. There was a moment when the look in Xue’s eyes changed, as though he might be about to wake up.

“She will be fine George, trust her..... Go and enjoy some time with Malou old friend. None of us are getting any younger.”

It was true of course, all of it. None of them were getting any younger and if Eugenie could pull his conspiracy apart so easily.....

“I almost feel sorry for Villand.” He muttered, as he used the freight elevator.

He’d tried his best to help Eugenie and failed, she didn’t want his help. He found Malou looking at the stock report and making a list of what wines needed reordering. There were times, when even he tended to forget that she ran a successful luxury hotel.

“Did you send them on their way ?” She asked.

“No, she got to them..... All of them. She got her own way Malou, Eugenie is now on her own, completely on her own.”

Malou hugged him, his second unexpected hug of the evening.

“You smell of car polish.”

“Xue hugged me.”

“I can leave the wine order until the morning. Call room service George and get them to send up something nice..... I’ll leave the choice to you George, surprise me.”

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There had been steam coming from the tunnel and a few minor explosions of loose rock. All driven by almost unlimited amounts of energy finding water. Kallina hadn’t had much in the way of formal education, she’d just been around for a long time and read a lot. She knew that most volcanoes were caused by mixing energy with water, and the resulting super-heated steam melting rocks into lava. She knew that those kinds of forces needed to be treated with respect. She linked minds with Ruby.

“We’re nearly at the caves, I can feel it.”

“I feel it too.” Said Ruby. “The vibrations under our feet are changing.”

It had taken a while. So many hours that Kallina was finding it difficult to keep her mind focused. The soldiers manning the antitank weapons looked to be trying to sleep at one point. It was probably

only the noise from the tunnelling keeping them awake. The vertical shaft wasn't going to be used, so it could be rough. The two mile long shaft ran at a gradient they could just about walk down. It needed to be smoother, safer and have as few obstructions as possible. There would be rocks to walk around of course, nothing created that quickly was going to be perfect.

"Any moment now." From Charlie.

Everyone was going to walk, even her and the others who had the ability to move their location through the power of their mind alone. Even Kallina didn't fancy transporting herself to an unknown cave system with unknown conditions and the likelihood of finding angry Nagala.

"I'll keep pushing power through for a few minutes, after we break through." From Ruby.

No need for Ruby to explain, everyone linked to her mind would understand. Get the end of the tunnel white hot to deter any Nagala who might fancy their chances of escaping to the surface. The Arbiters had said the Nagala would keep to the caves, but after millennia of starvation and neglect.....Their behaviour might well have changed.

"We're close, very close." Said Ruby.

The ground vibrations became more of a shudder than a simple vibration. As it built to the point where Kallina was afraid of losing her footing, there was an explosion about half a mile to the east. All heads turned but Ruby's, she still had the tunnel to finish off. A spike of flames was rising into the sky and it was near enough to draw even more attention to what had been their secret mining operation.

"How bad do you think it is?" From Sophie.

"Crap.... Have we opened up the rift?" From Tlal.

Kallina still felt strange vibrations under her feet, but they didn't feel that bad. Fracking had been known to cause earthquakes and Ruby was doing far worse things to the ground than drilling for shale gas.

"I think we're alright." She told them. "Just a blip.....I hope."

"Now..... We're through!" From Ruby.

Kallina hadn't known it was going to happen, none of them did. There wasn't a precedent for the kind of mining they were doing, there were no books to read or classes to attend. As they broke through into the caves two miles below, a wall of flame came back up the tunnel. It went up into the African sky like a huge firework, a supersized roman candle. If Sophie hadn't been alert and keeping the shielding powered up, a lot of them might have been killed or injured. The sky full of flames ended as suddenly as it had started.

"What the hell was that?" From Tlal.

"No idea.....Might have been cold cave air meeting white hot tunnel rocks." From Ruby.

No need for a linking of minds, the dreadful and constant noise of tortured rocks had stopped.

"I can still feel a little vibration." Said Kallina.

"We'll have to risk it." Said Ruby. "We might get unwanted visitors once the tunnel cools. You need to do your thing Kallina."

"Alright..... You'll know when I've done it."

Kallina instantly moved herself to the first hole they'd made in the ground, the vertical shaft at their original basecamp. It was cool there now, not even the faintest trace of steam. The vibrations coming up through her feet were worrying her. Ruby was right though, there wasn't time to worry about what might happen. Too many things were in motion for them to delay Kallina doing her thing. Satellites would be watching, planes would be on the way. There was a good chance that three hundred angry and hungry Nagala were waiting for the tunnel to cool.

“It has to be now.” She muttered.

Kallina transformed herself into Baba Yaga, she was getting quite fast at doing it. Pretty blonde Kallina became the witch of the woods, the evil creature who could still scare tough Russian soldiers until they peed in their pants. Whether she was genuinely evil depended a lot on the views and perspective of those judging her. Personally, Baba Yaga regretted nothing in her past. Baba Yaga had an edge when it came to using the energy derived from nature. She had far more precision and skill as Baba Yaga, than as Kallina.

There wasn't much power left in the vortex spinning high above her head, but there was enough. She pulled it down into a lance of pure energy and sent it down the shaft. First all that power would heat up the water again, though Baba Yaga was too tough to be bothered by a little steam. Once the water was hot enough, she used the last of the energy to carefully.....Oh so carefully, break through into the main tunnel Ruby had so carefully created.

“Die.... Boil and drown you vermin.....Die.” Muttered Baba Yaga.

Ruby had told her the weird percentage of the amount of water held in Lake Windermere, but it didn't mean much to her. Baba Yaga knew she'd just released enough boiling water to fill the tunnels where the Nagala would be waiting. The water would cool and drain away of course, but hopefully.....Not before it had killed the vast majority of the Nagala.

“Boil and die.....Boil, drown and die.”

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