

Ruby V : Machu Picchu

Chapter 17 – Bury It Deep

“Ruby’s people trusted Ellie’s people; it tended to happen when different teams worked together. Spider had joked about it being a form of Stockholm syndrome, though he might have been closer to the truth than he thought.”

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Sophie of course had wanted to attack the large house the Colonel was using as his headquarters. People had personality types and the wunderkinds seemed ruled by them as much as humans. Sophie was a kick em in the shins kind of woman, while Eugenie was all for wait and see. Of course, Eugenie wanted to sit tight and let the cult come to them.

“We know the dig site pretty well now and we can dig in.” Ruby had said. “On the other hand, the Colonel will be trying to attack somewhere he knows very little about. It gives us an advantage, a huge advantage.”

Ruby was in charge and she’d decided they’d get prepared and let the cult make the first move. It made a lot of sense, though Sophie was prowling around the camp like a bored tiger. Lol was using a machete to hack at slabs of the top soil, which had the consistency of reinforced concrete. Eugenie didn’t think the machete would last long, but it had to be admitted. He was creating some very solid looking bricks.

“Hmmmmm, I need to dig down another foot.” Said Lol. “Then a low wall of my homemade bricks and.....We’ll have a pretty good gun emplacement. With the trees hiding us a little, we’ll give a nasty surprise to anyone attacking the student accommodation.”

Eugenie had a wandering brief for when the attack came. She was going to be wherever her skills and gifts could be of most use. Number one priority for everyone was making sure the students were unharmed. Second priority was dealing with the Colonel, who seemed to be a Scarlet Pimpernel kind of guy. Lily was going to be in the gun emplacement with Lol, using one of the assault rifles unintentionally gifted to them by Mitch. Lily had received proper training with fully automatic weapons. They’d have plenty of ammo and with luck; they both might survive the battle.

“Just keep your head down and a finger on the trigger.” Said Eugenie.

“Suppression fire.....Lily has discussed that.” Said Lol. “Personally.....I’d like to take aim and hit someone. Especially if it’s the damned Colonel.”

“Ahh..... They seek him here, they seek him there....” Said Eugenie. “Personally, I think Ruby will get him, when the right moment presents itself.”

Lol had decided to dry stone wall his creation, or at least use the same idea. Lots of his home cut bricks, pushed together and finished off with a coating of mud. It would work and probably stop high velocity bullets.

“Do we have a definite time for Baba Yaga’s.....Whatever we’re calling it ?” Asked Lol.

“Hmmmmm, Cal called it a send-off, which seems a bit flippant.” Said Eugenie. “Ruby refers to it as Baba Yaga’s final goodbye, which still sounds a bit.....You know. I can see everyone using the term though. Her final goodbye is at about three this afternoon.”

Lol was giving her a lopsided grin and she had a pretty good idea what he was about to mention. It wasn't anything to grin about.....Actually it was, though mainly because it involved the constantly moody Tilda.

"Is Cal bringing Tilda?" Asked Lol.

"She did ask, but Ruby said no." Said Eugenie. "Ellie will be there, but none of her students."

"Someone has to tell Cal why Tilda might be so keen on her." Said Lol.

"No, never, that would be unforgivable." Said Eugenie. "They're about the same age and Cal is hardly a naïve innocent. If we leave them in peace, I'm sure the two girls will sort it out."

"Cal might hurt Tilda, if she feels threatened."

"No, no.....I mean it Lol, no interfering." Said Eugenie. "This isn't the first time one of the wunderkinds has been in a similar situation, men and women. We always allow them to work it out for themselves. Yes, Cal has only been with men, as far as we know. That doesn't mean she might not be interested in.....You know."

"Sometimes batting for the other side." Said Lol.

"Exactly." Said Eugenie.

Ruby had experimented a little, though that probably wasn't the right word. The entire area of sexuality was full of wrong words, or right words that could still cause trouble. Ruby had slept with several women, including an American girl while in Vladivostok. That had seemed quite serious, for a while. Everyone had kept opinions to themselves then and they'd do so again, for Cal. Eugenie leant forward and kissed Lol.

"Come on, I'll help you build your dry stone wall." She said.

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Professor Ellie Nicholas had considered calling the police, or the army. At one point, when Eugenie had appeared carrying a box of guns, Ellie would have considered calling anyone. She'd once dated a man in the Directorate General of Captaincies and Coast Guard of Peru....The Peruvian coast guard. He'd never carried a gun, but she still had his phone number. Basically she'd be calling them to say her students had seen strange men in the woods. If you wanted a reputation for being a professional member of the university, you didn't start talking about strange men in the woods. Anyway, Ruby could have called anyone who needed to be called; she probably had most of them on speed dial. No, for better or for worse, it was going to be Ruby's people defending the dig site and keeping them all safe. For what felt like the hundredth time in the last couple of days, Ellie walked down the stone steps and into Baba Yaga's tomb.

"How are things coming along?" Ellie asked. "Will you be finished this morning?"

"I need about another hour, then I'll be done." Said Tilda.

"That's good; I really do appreciate all your hard work."

Tilda had borrowed two students from another project and finished the photographic survey a day earlier than expected. Her attitude had changed from mildly antagonistic, to being almost a model student. Cal was the reason; everyone had noticed their growing friendship. Maybe Ellie was cynical, but she viewed female students forming intimate friendships as safer than the usual boy-girl mix. When girls got hot and sweaty together, neither of them was likely to get pregnant.

"I'd still like to attend the service Ruby has planned." Said Tilda.

"Not my decision, Ruby wants it to be just her people." Said Ellie.

"You're going."

A flash of the old antagonistic Tilda, with her granite eyed glare. There could be no explaining herself to Tilda, or any of the students. Let them get away with that once and she'd have to justify every decision. Ellie had been there and remembered that particular piece of hell.

"Just be well away from the tomb before three." Said Ellie.

Ellie hadn't created a new item for her planner, no daily viewing of readiness for action. It was just that with Ruby sealing and hiding the tomb, it seemed an ideal time to walk the wire and inspect the fortifications. Not that there was a wire, or much in the way of fortifications. It had been a dry few days and the lack of mud made it a pleasant walk to the student accommodation area. Eugenie was there, another one of Ruby's people. She and Lorenzo were building something that resembled a small World War II bunker. It was intended that two people would sit in it and fire automatic weapons at their enemy. Seeing the structure was quite worrying, it made it all more real.

"Wow, that looks impressive." Said Ellie.

"Two layers of bricks and a topping of dried mud.....It'll stop just about anything." Said Lorenzo.

"When will it be ready?" Asked Ellie.

"Hmmmmm, the mud will need to dry a little." Said Eugenie. "It could be used in the morning, if we get all the bricks in place today."

"I'll leave you to it."

No one seemed to be thinking in terms of if they were attacked, it was now a question of when. Ellie had already looked at the student accommodation area that morning. They might get anxious if she appeared twice in the same day. There was Cal of course, with her cages and her project to study the local small mammals.

"There'll be more to that than meets the eye." Ellie muttered.

Her feet seemed to take her in the direction of Cal's tent, without her consciously deciding to go there. The girl called it her research lab, there was even a note saying that, fixed to the door with duct tape. The tent was in a sunny glade, with no large trees nearby, that might lose branches in a storm. Whoever had chosen the spot knew their stuff and Ellie suspected it had been Spider. Cal was outside her tent with Jim, both of them looking at a smallish creature in a wooden cage.

"That looks interesting, what have you caught?" Asked Ellie.

Getting closer, it was possible to see them actually petting whatever they'd caught. Cal had her fingers through the bars of the cage, rubbing its ears.

"Sophie caught it, so we're not sure." Said Jim. "Looks like a tree dweller to me, something out of the forest canopy."

"Very friendly, it likes its head being scratched." Added Cal.

"You need to identify it; there are endangered species in this area." Said Ellie.

"I'm not hurting it." Said Cal. "I'll study it for a while, before letting it go. I've no intention of hurting any of the animals I study."

"Weird thing.....We tried all sorts of leaves, but it loves to eat cat food." Said Jim.

"Oh dear, Constanze won't be pleased." Said Ellie.

"There's plenty to go around." Said Cal.

Whatever it was, the captured animal was friendly. Ellie knelt down and pushed a finger between the wooden bars. It not only loved her rubbing its tummy, it made a kind of purring sound.

"I'm no expert.....But I think your new friend might be a small Kinkajou. There are several subspecies in Peru. I seem to remember they're docile, but they do bite" Said Ellie.

"We'll look after him, or her." Said Jim.

Ellie was glad Jim was working with Cal, even if he couldn't tell the gender of a creature who was obviously a female. Cal needed to be seen as one of them, rather than the strange girl who experimented with animals. Plus, Ellie could get Jim to report anything strange to her, just in case Cal was a strange girl who did weird things in a tent.

"Right.....Must be off." Said Ellie. "I'll see you at the Baba Yaga send-off, Cal."

"I wanted to call it that." Muttered Cal.

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Abe had been through the induction course for the Polandrous Foundation, he'd heard why it was important to make sure any external door was properly closed after being used. Late one Friday night, a night time security guard, had left a door ajar to go out for a kebab. He'd come back to find half a dozen drunks camped out in the reception area. Their part of London was like that, a mix of the well to do, trying to coexist with various inhabitants of the street. Not that Abe judged, he tried to treat others as he'd like to be treated. He was just very careful to make sure doors were locked, after leaving or entering the Polandrous building. He was early and so was Penny.

"Ahhh, you had your driver drop you off at the coffee place." Said Abe.

"If I'm early I go to the Under the Bridge café." Said Penny. "Always a queue, but the coffee is worth queueing for. They do nice nibbles too."

To Abe, getting a chauffer to drop you at the local café, was a sign that you'd made it right to the top of the tree. They were still some way from their building and he could tell Penny was getting agitated.

"Oh, this won't do.....I'm not having this." Penny muttered.

Barely eight in the morning and there were two men up against the front doors of the Polandrous Foundation. Drunk too by the way they were stumbling about. There were other addictions of course, though booze was still the most affordable and easily available. Abe had to respect Penny; she went at the men, with no sign of fear.

"You two again !" Yelled Penny. "We've been through this before. I will call the police if you keep pestering people trying to enter the building."

"We're just stood here." Said the larger one.

"Not doing anything.....We're not doing anything." Muttered the smaller one.

"You ask for money and refuse to move if you don't get it." Yelled Penny.

"Not doing anything."

"Get out of my way.....I'm going to get the police to sort you out." Said Penny.

It happened so fast, yet Abe's mind went into a kind of slow motion. Somewhere deep down he'd noticed the signs, though he wasn't conscious of it. Penny tried to shove past the larger of the two men, to get into the building. It was the other one, the small guy, who'd grabbed her arm. The world slowed down for Abe, he had as much time as he needed. First a light touch on the hand holding Penny's arm. A little induced pain, just enough to make the man yelp and let go.

"No, you will not touch her." Said Abe.

The next piece of using his gifts was new, they did seem to keep changing and evolving. He'd intended to use a firm but harmless shove, to get the men well out of the way. Push them back against the far wall of the covered entrance way, without actually hurting anyone. Instead, his mind had ideas of its own. A ripple effect appeared between him and the two drunks, which they could probably see. As Abe moved his hand towards the men, the ripples became closer together. As the ripples moved forward the drunks were picked up and pushed against the far wall. Not as gently as Abe had intended, but no worse than they deserved.

"You're not wanted here.....Never come back again." Said Abe.

An apology would have been nice, an acceptance that maybe they had done something bad. Instead they glared at him for a few seconds, before wandering off in the direction of Liverpool Street.

"So frustrating." Said Penny. "The police blame the local council, who then blame the police. Around and around it goes.....Though they might be gone for a while."

They were inside the building when Penny handed him a paper bag, with something inside it.

"I bought two pastries at the café." She said. "I think you've earned this one."

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Colonel Arthur Moore knew what he was doing, but sometimes wondered about those around him. Yes, he'd attended all the right courses and knew it was wrong to consider you were surrounded by idiots. There was that line though; of knowing it was his personal failing.....Yet still thinking he just needed some better men to command. He wasn't good at hiding his anger either, yet his soldiers would happily follow him anywhere. Either all the courses the US military had sent him on were universally wrong.....

"Or I really am surrounded by fools." He muttered.

The notion made him smile and he was still smiling when Walt arrived in his makeshift office at the rear of the dilapidated old house. Walt was a decent man and a tolerable organiser. When he arrived carrying piles of papers though.....That never improved Arthur's day.

"Sorry.....Do you have a moment?" Asked Walt.

"Come in.....I noticed Doc Travis arrived during the night." Said Arthur. "Is he being helpful?"

"Yes, very.....He's already made the news guy, Colin Reese.....Much more comfortable."

"Good.....Good, but keep an eye on the Doc.....He doesn't seem as dedicated to the cause as he once was."

"Will do.....I have some reports you'll be interested in.....May I?" Asked Walt.

Walt nodded towards Arthur's tidy desk and Arthur nodded back. Soon his desk would be covered in all the facts and figures he never really wanted to know. Walt loved that kind of thing though and as they'd known each other for years, Arthur tended to smile while half his mind wandered elsewhere.

"We have two more static positions.....Here and here." Said Walt, pointing at a map with lots of scribbles over it in red ink. "Well hidden.....Anyone attacking will be in for a surprise."

There was more, a hell of a lot more. Walt was all about defending the house, keeping Arthur safe if there was an attack by Ruby and her fighters. Arthur had appreciated the defences, up to a point.

That point had now been reached.

".....and if we place a fifty calibre right here....."

"Sorry Walt, we're not creating any more static defences for the house." Said Arthur. "They use up our resources and get our soldiers used to a mentality of defending. In fact.....We should start taking apart a few of the fixed defences at the side of the house.....Here and here." Said Arthur, as he put a cross through the defences Walt seemed to love.

"No.....We can't do that.....Supposing Ruby attacks." Shouted Walt.

"Walt.....Calm down." Said Arthur. "Our enemies in the media call us a cult, but we're not. I've seen FBI notices that call us terrorists, which we're not. Neither are we an army with a fortified base of operations. We're guerrilla fighters my old friend. We attack and after we've caused as much damage as possible, we vanish into the night. Hit and run, being there one moment, but gone before their reinforcements can arrive. It was how a few undisciplined German tribes wore down and eventually destroyed the army of Quintilius Varus."

"If you say so." Said Walt.

“Don’t sulk.....Begin getting everyone ready, we’ll be attacking the dig site at around four tomorrow morning. Take apart the defences using weapons we’ll need for the attack. If Ruby was going to attack, she’d have done it by now..... Oh, and we’ll take the Doc with us. About time he earned the money we pay him.”

“You’re sure Ruby won’t attack the house ?” Asked Walt.

“Yes..... And it has nothing to do with her being scared of us.” Said Arthur. “Ruby cares about the university people at the archaeological dig and that keeps her there. I’m sure she’d love to follow up crushing our dumpster with a full attack. Doing so would leave the students defenceless though, so no.....She won’t be attacking us.”

“We could do with another heavy truck.” Said Walt.

“Use what we have.....Think guerrilla warfare, Walt.....Strike and move, strike again and move again. We’re attacking at four tomorrow morning.”

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Sophie found herself crying, as it became her turn to say a few words about Baba Yaga, Kallina as most of the wunderkinds had known her, for countless decades. Sophie had asked to be one of those saying a final goodbye, but now that the moment had arrived.....

“Take your time Sophie....No rush.” Said Ruby.

Todd had said a few nice things, before Eugenie had spoken. Eugenie’s off the cuff eulogy had been so beautiful, so moving.....

“I’m alright now.” Said Sophie.

Sophie felt someone hold her hand and realised it was young Cal. The tomb was large enough for everyone to fit inside, but only just. Not the place for claustrophobics, the air was beginning to feel a little stale. Once they sealed and buried it, the tomb was unlikely to be opened again for thousands of years, maybe never.

“Looking back on things now, Kallina may not have done everything right.” Said Sophie. “Who does though ?.....As I often say, hindsight is always twenty-twenty vision. We were kept away from the rest of the world to protect us. And to learn, our education was never neglected, ever. Kallina was our first mother, we must never forget that.”

“She loved us.” Said Eugenie.

“Yes, everything was based around love, even if it now seems to have been a little over protective.

We’re lucky to have Ruby as our second mother.” Said Sophie.

“Very lucky.” Muttered Cal.

“I’m so far away from what I intended to say.” Said Sophie. “Baba Yaga could be terrifying, I’m sure we were all scared of her at one time or another. But the only reason some of us are still alive, is because she was so fierce and protective. I just wish that we’d known more about her past. That’s all.....I will always love Kallina.”

“I’ll never forget her.” Said Eugenie.

“I never met her, but I wish I had.” Said Thio.

Ruby spoke last and hardly said anything at all. Just getting there and realising it was to be Baba Yaga’s final resting place, had tired everyone out. Words were no longer needed, or even appropriate. Sophie put her hand on the sarcophagus holding Kallina’s ashes, expecting to feel something, anything. Nothing was there though; the wunderkinds’ first mother had passed on.

“No rush.....If anyone needs a few more minutes, just say.” Said Ruby.

Lots of shaking heads, everyone had said their goodbyes and thought about Kallina the beautiful blonde haired Russian woman and her alternative persona.....Baba Yaga, the wild witch of the woods.

"Those of you I've asked to remain, know who you are." Said Ruby. "Everyone else needs to leave and get to a place a safe distance away. The refectory tent would be my suggestion, but the choice is yours."

It was a little chaotic, with those staying getting in the way of those trying to get out of the tomb. Still, it would have seemed wrong without some kind mild aggravation. Sophie had been to a few funerals and they'd all included some kind of mixed up shit going on.

"Do I really have to leave, Sophie." Asked Caleb.

"Yes, sorry I should have told you." Said Sophie. "I'm afraid the next part of our final goodbye, is only for a select few."

"Wunderkinds only huh?"

"Something like that." She said.

Sophie kissed Caleb and quite quickly, there were just the four of them stood next to the sarcophagus in the centre of the tomb. Ruby, herself, Eugenie and a little bit of a surprise, Cal. All of them with unimaginable gifts and together.... More than capable of burying the tomb under hundreds of feet of topsoil and rocks.

"Todd will give us a few minutes, before disconnecting power to the lights." Said Ruby.

Ruby had told her to bring a flashlight, which made more sense now. Less than five minutes later, the lights went out. It made it better somehow, the four of them huddled together in the light of a single small flashlight.

"Oh, she'd have loved this." Said Eugenie.

"I'm sure part of her still exists inside Cal." Said Ruby. "Hopefully, Kallina might be aware of what we're doing. I just hope she approves."

"I'm sorry; I sense something.....But have no way of talking to that part of me." Said Cal.

"No one expects you to be her." Said Ruby. "Just add your power to ours, as I push us down into the ground."

"Be weird is this doesn't work." Said Eugenie. "Lorenzo is bound to think I've run away."

"Please, don't.....The idea of being buried alive." Said Cal. "Please don't....No more of that."

"No more weird jokes, Eugenie." Said Ruby. "We'll be fine, though first I need to seal the door."

It began with a little heat, which quickly became uncomfortable. Nothing too bad, no one was going to be injured by it. Like a day at the beach, that turned out to be thirty two degrees, when the forecast had been twenty eight. Sophie knew Ruby was fusing a layer of soil to the outside of the tomb, while also using heat to seal the door. Even if a treasure hunter found the tomb, it would take explosives to break through the outer shell of solid, heat fused soil. Of course Sophie's flashlight chose that moment to go out. Sophie used a simple cantrip to produce a tiny glowing light in the palm of her hand.

"Thank you Sophie." Said Ruby. "Now I need all your power, from everyone here. Every last scrap.....I want to push us down to a thousand feet, which won't be easy. There's even a few metres of rocks and left over glacial garbage I need to push us through."

"I'll link to you, take what you need." Said Eugenie.

"And from me." Said Sophie.

"I have no idea how to....." Said Cal.

"I'll show you, Cal." Said Eugenie.

Ruby sat cross-legged on the floor, which they all copied. As Ruby closed her eyes, the vibration began. Sophie had been in Bermuda when hurricane Emily had hit the island chain. The vibration reminded her of when the hurricane had arrived, to tear satellite dishes from roofs and rip trees out of the ground. The noise too, like an express train going past, but one that never stopped going past. "I will not be scared; I will not be scared...." Muttered Cal.

"We will be fine, you can trust Ruby." Said Sophie.

Sophie held Cal's hand, while hoping it wasn't the day when Ruby got it wrong. Sophie could probably get herself up to the surface, but not if she was crushed inside an ancient stone tomb.

"Two hundred feet, we're going down very fast." Said Ruby.

They'd all know the depth, if they were interested. All of them could sense those left on the surface, most of them clustered in the refectory tent. It wasn't an exact science without two points to measure from, but Sophie tended to agree.....They were roughly two hundred feet down and still descending.

"Getting a bit warm." Said Eugenie.

"Good old fashioned friction.....Shouldn't get too bad." Said Ruby.

The heat continued to rise, as the tomb felt like it was shaking from side to side. It felt like being in some kind of insane elevator from hell. The noise had reached the point of being annoying, but wasn't getting any worse. Cal put her hands over her eyes and began to recite something that sounded like a prayer. Not that Sophie understood it, as Cal was muttering in Somali.

"Not far to go.....Almost there." Said Ruby.

Just when Sophie was about to mention the heat being unbearable, the tomb came to a halt. Sophie felt her own legs beginning to buckle, so she grabbed hold of Cal. It was a sudden stop and no one looked to be enjoying the sensation.

"I can feel Sarah, up there." Said Eugenie. "I make our depth as just over a thousand feet."

"Yes, we're deep down into the bedrock." Said Ruby.

"Now for the interesting part.....Getting out of here." Said Sophie.

"Can I have a volunteer to carry the lighting array?" Asked Ruby. "It is the property of Ellie's university and she did ask me to return it."

The lighting array hadn't worked since Todd had disconnected the power. It was such a mundane thing, after descending a thousand feet in a stone tomb that felt hotter than a sauna. Sophie was sure they could fry eggs on the floor.

"Alright, I'll grab it." Said Eugenie.

It was up to Ruby now, who as usual, overdid the whole self-deprecation business. If someone is going to take you out of a buried stone hotbox, you ideally want them to sound super confident, almost arrogant.

"I haven't done this very often with more than myself and one other person." Said Ruby. "I will need to concentrate, so no shouting or sudden movements. Definitely no messing about."

"No messing about it is then." Muttered Eugenie.

"Please.....I can't stand it in here." Said Cal.

"This should be quite quick." Said Ruby.

They could have definitely fried eggs on the stone floor. Sophie's feet were far too hot for comfort and she was sure the soles of her trainers were melting. They were her expensive trainers too, not the worn out ones she had been wearing around the dig site.

"With a bit of luck.....Here we go." Said Ruby.

Someone had to discuss the concept of motivational speaking with Ruby, if they could find anyone brave enough. Self-deprecation was wonderful in its place, but this wasn't it. Ruby moved her right hand from side to side and Sophie felt paralysed. No, not paralysed, she felt held tight where she was. After that it wasn't quick, it was instant. The air suddenly felt cold, and there was a wonderful cool breeze. All of them were there, not far from where Baba Yaga's tomb had been. Eugenie looked around and ran towards Lorenzo, who must have been waiting for her. Cal was down on her knees and reciting yet another prayer. Was it all a bit over the top? Sophie thought so, until she realised her own heart was racing. They had been inside a buried tomb.....A fucking buried tomb.

"It just left behind a shallow indentation in the ground." Said Ruby.

"What did?" Asked Sophie.

"The tomb of course, do keep up.....I thought there'd be a hole to fill in, but this is perfect. Two summers and the weeds will hide it completely." Said Ruby.

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Spider had been told by Lily that there was a tree with a platform near the top. One of the really big trees, with the platform right up just below the canopy of leaves. A botany student had spent a lot of time suspended on ropes to build the platform, a tree fancier really, though he had trapped some interesting bugs up there. After he'd returned home to Stockholm, no one else had bothered much with the platform. Sarah was with him, carrying some of the kit he might need. Todd had agreed to the plan, though Sarah still thought he was insane.

"I'm thinking of not taking the pill anymore, after we get home." Said Sarah.

"What?"

"Oh, I knew it.....You're upset." Said Sarah.

"Not upset, Sarah.....This just seems a weird time and place to tell me."

"I'm thirty three now and my eggs aren't getting any younger." Said Sarah. "Most of my friends from college have a kid by now, some have several. Leave it any longer and I might never have a child. That thought really depresses me."

Spider had once tried to tell Sarah what she wanted to hear, which had been a huge mistake. He currently told her what he really felt and surprisingly, they had far fewer serious arguments. Luckily, he too was quite keen to have a kid. Preferably a boy of course.....Didn't every man want a chip off the old block?

"We could go home after the Colonel has been captured, or killed, or whatever Ruby does to him. That would get things started a little earlier." Said Spider.

"Yes, but we did promise to stay with Ruby until we all went home."

"I can remember.....Look, there is the tree." Said Spider. "Sophie levitated to the top and left a knotted rope hanging down. There are also a few metal footholds the student hammered in. They loosen up, but with the rope and the metal....."

"You've still got to be very careful." Said Sarah.

Spider had a small pair of field glasses he'd borrowed from Todd. Nearly everything Spider had was supplied by the British military in one way or another, even the sniper rifle Todd had managed to acquire.

"Yes, Sophie was right, there are two platforms." Said Spider. "One up near the top of the tree and another about six feet below it. That could be useful, if I need to store food and water for a long wait."

"I don't like the idea of you being up there." Said Sarah. "You shoot the Colonel and all his men fire everything they have at the guy in the tree, you."

“Lorenzo and Lily will be in their homemade bunker, firing on fully automatic.” Said Spider. “If I do get a shot at the elusive Colonel, they won’t know where the shot came from. Plus.....And it’s a biggie.....There are a lot of trees in this area. I’ll be on the proverbial needle in a haystack.”

“Fine.....But I’ll be watching from close by.” Said Sarah.

“No, that’s crazy ! You’ll get yourself killed.”

“No arguments about it, future father of my children.” Said Sarah. “I’m good with a gun and need your semen. I’ve a huge vested interest in keeping you alive....Anyway; Sophie said she’ll come running if I’m in too much trouble.”

Spider had seen documentaries on the war in the Pacific. Lone snipers up the only tree in the area, or on the edge of a roof. As soon as they shot the local big wig, everyone opened fire in their direction. The tree with the platform really was one among a great many. Plus the Colonel’s men wouldn’t be arriving in huge numbers. Twenty or so, according to info Ruby had received from the FBI, thirty at the very most. Thirty men attacking somewhere they don’t know that well, would keep moving. In and out, leaving chaos in their wake.

“If I do get the Colonel, they might not even realise it.” He muttered.

“I’m still going to be hiding somewhere nearby.” Said Sarah. “Think of me as your unseen guardian angel. A body guard for the sniper....Hey, that would make a great TV drama.”

“Yeah, right.....So, future mother of my rug rats.....Are you coming up the tree to have a look ?”

“No way, I’ve two left feet and hate heights.” Said Sarah. “I’ll wait down here and watch you clamber up to the top.”

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“They’re all technically adults, though some of them act like kids.” Said Ellie. “I still feel like a stand in parent, Ruby. Even for the post grad doctorate people, many of whom are in their thirties. In loco parentis is the official phrase and I take it really seriously.”

Just the two of them at the back of the bus, involved in a question that had to remain private. Ellie and her students knew everyone’s real names; many had actually witnessed the death of Luis, who’d been shot by Lily. Bizarrely some had a good idea Lily had been MI6 trained, though Lily denied telling them. Ruby’s people trusted Ellie’s people; it tended to happen when different teams worked together. Spider had joked about it being a form of Stockholm syndrome, though he might have been closer to the truth than he thought. Ellie’s gang of students knew Ruby’s team were dangerous, but they were also friends.

“If there’s damage to property, I can get it replaced.” Said Ruby. “I know something like a bullet riddled trailer isn’t something either of us wants to dwell on, but it could easily be replaced. I know organisations with influence and deep pockets. I’m just hoping you won’t be inclined to report everything that might occur to your university and the police.”

Ellie had already created an impossible situation for herself and Ruby knew that. Mitch was still being held prisoner as a hostage and three of the Colonel’s men had been killed. Then there was the number of automatic weapons in the dig site. Yet, out of friendship and a lot of mutual back scratching, Ellie had reported none of it.

“My students like your people, they’re exciting and.....That dreadful word, cool.” Said Ellie. “I can avoid reporting just about all damage to property, as long as the items are replaced. As for the likes of Jim and Mars.....They’ll never tell a soul about anything they see here. You’re our friends, Ruby Mason. The only things I can’t ignore are injuries and deaths. As I’m sure you understand, families get involved and they’re likely to ask a lot of questions.”

“Yes, I understand.....Personally, I’d go ballistic if someone I loved was injured.” Said Ruby.

“Or killed, Ruby.....If any of my students are killed, I’ll contact the police immediately. You’re fighting a private war and being on the right side, isn’t an excuse. It’s in your own interest to keep my kids safe.”

“Every one of my team will do their best to avoid them being hurt.” Said Ruby.

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