

Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

Chapter 1 – Finding Baba Yaga

“Her much loved cheese plant had lost a leaf, shredded into tiny pieces. The prime suspect was sleeping in a comfy chair. Constanze was clever, even for a cat. She had been known to feign sleep to look innocent.”

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Spider now had a set of keys to Ruby’s flat in Hackney, so did Sarah. It didn’t feel right in some way, being given keys. It didn’t suit his own view of himself, even if he was now forty. After all, he had met Ruby when he’d tried to burgle the flat, she’d then shared with a woman called Myriam. He’d found enough money in their home to make all his dreams come true. Then Ruby had given him one of her special smiles. Spider had then become her friend and spent quite a lot of his evenings redecorating the flat he’d intended to rob. As for poor Myriam, she’d been killed by South London gangsters.

“Just doesn’t feel right.” He muttered.

He opened the outside door of the large house which had been converted into several separate flats. Ruby owned the entire house, though none of the tenants knew that.

“They’ll just pester me for a jacuzzi and Axminster carpets up the stairs.” She’d once said.

Officially the block was owned by a property company, which in turn was owned by a retired realtor in Miami, or maybe she was in Portland ? All a front for Ruby, to get around the need to explain how a twenty six year old PA, had enough money to last several lifetimes. Not that Ruby Anne Mason would be twenty six for much longer, her birthday was at the end of the month.

Spider stopped outside the door of the ground floor front apartment. There was jazz playing softly, Angie seemed to like Jazz, though Spider thought music should actually sound like music. Angie was new, the previous lady in the flat had gone to live with relatives. A flash of her best smile and Angie had agreed to take in Ruby’s parcels and look after her cat when she away. No temptation to knock on the door, there was no such thing as a quick chat with Angie.

“Maybe another time, but not today.” He muttered.

Ruby wasn’t at home, he knew that. He wanted to be there, waiting in her place when she arrived home. The news he’d heard was weird and serious and it involved someone Ruby thought of as a friend. So, no time for tea, banter and a little mild flirtation with Angie.

On the next landing Spider picked up the slight funky smell, which made the house feel like home. Ruby claimed to have hired experts to fix the problem, but he wondered if she really had. The aroma wasn’t strong enough to be offensive and had been there since Ruby had moved in. To most of her friends the funky smell said home, better than the aroma of coffee, or fresh bread. The last set of stairs took him to Ruby’s flat. He had the key ready to use, until he heard a sound from inside. He put the keys back in his pockets.

“I’ll wait.” He mumbled.

He thought Todd was still in her life, the soldier who’d been with them all in Uganda. Todd was in some kind of special unit; he didn’t do the nine to five thing. Ruby also had some eccentric and rather strange friends, even stranger than him. She also valued her privacy. Spider sat on the stairs and rested his head against the wall. Anyway, he needed a rest, his leg still hurt. It had only been six

months since the business in Uganda. He'd expected to die of his wounds, so he wasn't complaining about a slightly stiff leg.

"I'll just rest my eyes."

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Ruby had been in Paris the week before, though she remembered Spider asking about her working hours when she was in London. Still, it was a bit of a shock to see him fast asleep outside the door to her flat. Spider had been born with the name Rupert Bailey, though he hated anyone calling him Rupert. For a long time, he'd earned a good living by burglary and collecting money from people who weren't keen on paying what they owed. He had both the voice and appearance to aid him in demanding money with menaces. Still, Ruby had to admit it, he looked almost cute when fast asleep in her hallway. Most would have looked at Spider and left him well alone. Ruby knelt down in front of him and kissed him on the forehead.

"Spider.....Wake up Spider."

He had a decent smile, even if it was a bit lopsided. A boy child who was half Bengali and half Glaswegian and they'd called him Rupert..... Hell, it was almost guaranteed to turn him into a complete fuckup.

"Hello Ruby."

"You've got a key and I've a nice couch if you fancied a nap."

"I heard a noise and didn't want to intrude."

"Todd is abroad, so it was probably the cat. She has times when she runs about like a wild thing.....Come in Spider and tell me what brings you to Hackney."

The first job was to close the curtains, it was already well past dusk. Her much loved cheese plant had lost a leaf, shredded into tiny pieces. The prime suspect was sleeping in a comfy chair.

Constance was clever, even for a cat. She had been known to feign sleep to look innocent. Ruby gave her head a quick scratch and was rewarded by a deep purr.

"Todd has a fridge full of the beer you like, if you fancy one?"

"Yeah, that'd be great."

"We could order a take away.....Can you stay, or has Sarah demanded your presence for dinner?"

"I have the time, there's something I need to tell you."

"I thought there might be."

Ruby kicked off her pair of expensive Blahniks and was instantly a couple of inches shorter. She loved heels, but removing them at the end of a long day, was a vital part of coming home. She gave Spider the bottle of beer and a glass, while she drank one straight from the bottle.

"Don't tell me Spider, everyone is worried about Ruby. Am I coping after Kallina turned on me and Charlotte went off to do her own thing? Have I gone a little strange again? After all, it's six months and I still haven't dealt with Kallina as Baba Yaga. Are any of us safe in our beds?"

He had the decency to look embarrassed, though as with everything, his face made embarrassment look a little intimidating. Tempting to look into his mind, though she hadn't done that for quite a long time. It felt like eavesdropping, which she hated.

"Yeah, alright there is a bit of that. I know Sarah is a little scared. We know what Kallina can do, there is no use locking a door. She can go anywhere. I can remember her turning a large mansion in Georgia, into rubble."

"She won't Spider, I'm sure of it. You didn't see her when I used every bit of my gifts to crush her. I heard her bones snap; I saw her head crushed. The sounds were worse than the blood, Spider."

Nothing could survive that, but she did. My guess is that even Baba Yaga can't fully heal herself after that. She'll be in hiding somewhere, probably still badly injured."

"Yes, you're probably right Ruby. We're old friends, so forgive me when I say someone needs to make sure she's either dead or harmless and that someone, should be you."

He was right of course and it was hard to be angry with him. Ruby hadn't wanted to find Kallina dead, still crushed and bloody. They'd been such good friends; she was the first person the wunderkinds had thought of as their mother. Ruby still felt guilty for not finding a better way to deal Kallina, a way that didn't end with violence.

"You're right Spider, I do need to make sure she isn't being influenced by the forces we found in Africa. I'm sure I would feel that kind of presence, but we need to be sure. I visit her house near Batumi quite often. I will start extending the list of places where I look for her."

"How do you travel to Batumi?" He asked.

She'd never deliberately hidden anything from Spider and Sarah, they were the two people who'd agreed to help her, when she was unaware she had any gifts.

"I absorbed something in Africa, what I can do has changed and developed. I have no idea if it has a proper name, I call it the shadow. When I do it, I feel like I'm just a shadow. No physical form, but I can see everywhere and anything I choose. No doors can keep me out."

"Like a ghost." Said Spider.

"Yes, perhaps.....Like a ghost. We can go to Batumi right now if you like? I can take you with me. It is a strange experience."

"Is it safe?" He asked.

"Probably not, I'm not sure."

"Alright then, I'll come with you."

Ruby had taken Sophie with her on a few visits to places around the world, but she was different to Spider. He was a hundred percent human, while Sophie definitely wasn't.

"Relax, Spider. Close your eyes until I tell you we're there."

Ruby concentrated on herself first, turning her body into a cloud of what looked like dust. She had no idea how she did it and just about everyone who might know about it was dead. There was Kallina of course, if they found her and if she was alive, and if she was feeling helpful. There was one other, but he was being awkward.

"True knowledge must be obtained by oneself, Ruby." Nazili Anso had told her.

Sometimes she wondered why he remained in London, if he had no intention of being what she'd hoped he'd be, her sensei, her guru, her teacher and friend. Once her form was no more than a shadow, she used her gifts on Spider. Good, no yelling, there was obviously no pain involved for humans. Once his form was like hers, she mixed them together, before concentrating on the house in Batumi. Their combined shadows spun around for a second or two, like a miniature cyclone. Then they vanished from her flat.

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"Open your eyes, we're there."

Colours were the first thing Spider noticed; it was as if he could see how hot things were. They were in the lounge of Kallina's house and the furniture was a dull grey. The windows though, they were glowing a bright yellow. Strange really, considering it had to be dark outside. The entire room was lit by a low-level yellow glow, which seemed to come from everywhere. Ruby was almost scary, her head was a throbbing, vibrant purple colour.

“Stairs feel weird, or at least they feel weird to me.” Said Ruby. “We’ll look around downstairs first. How does it feel, any discomfort?”

“No, but the colours.....Really wild.” He said.

Kallina’s old house in Georgia had burned down, so she’d moved to another. It was a stone’s throw from her old house, so he assumed Batumi was important to her in some way. Spider had visited her a few times while Kallina had been training the kids, so he recognised most of the furniture.

“I’ll take the kitchen.” Said Ruby. “We’re looking for any signs of recent occupation.”

Ghostly apparitions they might look, but Spider could hear her perfectly. Her voice had a bit of a muffled sound, but it was still clear.

“I’ll look in the old training room.” He said.

He reached out for the door handle, of course he did. His hand tingled a bit as it went right through the handle and a part of the door.

“Idiot.” He muttered.

His whole body seemed to vibrate slightly as he walked through the solid wooden door, though it wasn’t painful. He was in the room where the wunderkinds had come to be trained by Kallina, their first mother figure. There had been twenty of them once, until a few worried security services had tried to wipe them out. Now there were thirteen left, with a fourteenth, once Nari’s child grew up.

“Undisturbed dust on top of undisturbed dust.” He muttered. “No one has been here in months.”

Rows of desks, all too small for grown-ups. One desk lid had Sophie’s name dug into the surface.

Kallina always said she was by far the most naughty of them all. Kallina used to give them books in languages few of them knew, which had seemed strange to him.

“They need to work together to understand the book. Once they can read it all, they will understand it and remember the important parts forever.” Kallina had once told him.

Spider had taught them too, in his own way. There had been room for three at a time in his rented house in Ealing. He’d taught them street skills, the arts of persuading some tough characters, to pay up what they owed to other tough characters. Ruby had even encouraged him to introduce them to the noble art of burglary, with a little leg breaking thrown in. Add on their own gifts and extra strength and some of them became better at the rough stuff than him.

“Nothing here but memories.” He mumbled.

He’d slept in a small downstairs room during his visits, which now seemed a very long time ago. The bed was gone and there were rows of bookshelves, all full of dusty books. Knowing Kallina, some might well be priceless antiques. First editions, rare tomes and probably a few that most key libraries considered to be unobtainable. No worries about burglars though, Kallina was very good at making her homes effectively, invisible. At her old house, even the postman would walk right past, without his conscious mind realising the house was there. Once Kallina transformed into Baba Yaga, her powers were truly awesome and terrifying.

“Time to try the stairs.” He muttered.

As he put his foot out, it went through the stairs. Obvious really, it happened every time he tried.

“You need to think of your foot moving up.” Said Ruby. “Sophie says she pictures her foot on the next step, then the next.”

“So, why don’t I just drop through the floorboards and into the cellar?” He asked.

“Oh, dear Spider....I have no idea. I just know what buttons I need to press, but I have no idea how it works. Go on, picture your foot on the next step.”

To Spider it was incomprehensible, a magic trick. He pictured his foot on the next step and when he stepped forward, it was there. For some reason the magic didn’t work when he used the same logic

to grab the banisters. He did it though, he made it to the upstairs hallway, with Ruby right behind him.

"I have to see the front bedroom, the one I shared with Serge." Said Ruby. "I hope Kallina hasn't moved everything around."

Ruby rarely mentioned Serge since he'd died. The strange thing was that she still quoted Jurgis the dead mobster, as though he was her Guru. Spider never said it, but if Jurgis had been that good, he wouldn't have died from taking two bullets in his face. They both walked through the door of the front bedroom.

"Good, it's still the same as it was then." Said Ruby.

They both went to the window, even though it was night outside. Every living thing had its own glow, its own unique colour, or shade of a colour. Trees were a glowing brown, while grass was yellow. The entire sky looked full of low-level yellow light.

"The forest, with its memories." Said Ruby. "Do you remember when Charlotte and Sophie had a competition, to see who could levitate to the top of the large pine tree?"

"I wasn't here, though I heard about a tourist taking picture of them." He said.

"Oh yes, that could have been a disaster, those pictures went viral on YouTube. Luckily there are so many fake levitation pictures, that no one believed they were real."

They laughed and Ruby touched his hand, before holding his hand and looking at him.

"Wow, that was unexpected." Said Ruby. "I'm not sure if it might be useful, but it seems we can touch one another. Can you feel my hand?"

"Yes, though it feels cold."

"Same for me....Oh well, Spider. Some things just are and not everything is supposed to be understood. Come on, we should get back to London and order that takeaway. Order lots, I intend to invite Sarah over to join us."

Guilt maybe, he let go of Ruby's hand at the mention of Sarah. He'd always had a thing about Ruby, though he was realistic enough to accept they'd never be more than just very good friends.

"I erm.....She's going to have a long bath and pamper herself tonight." He said.

"Nonsense.....If I'm going after Kallina I'll need you both with me. I can hardly drag you around the globe and leave Mrs Spider at home. We can make our plans tonight."

"Alright, but we're not married Ruby." He said.

"Not yet, though I can recognise the signs. We must go and when Sarah arrives at the flat, you can tell me what you wanted to talk about."

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Sarah Simmons had known Ruby since they'd been on the same college course. She never had been good at saying no to Ruby, even if she deluded herself by thinking she was getting better at it. It wasn't that Ruby used her special smile to deliberately put the whammy, as Spider called it, on her friends. It was generally accepted by those who knew what she really was, that just being around her regularly had an effect. Mind you, she'd have gone crazy if Ruby had tried to arrange taking Spider abroad, without including her in the regular team of scoobys.

"She'll go after her birthday, bound to." Muttered Sarah.

Somewhere on the path less travelled, it always was with Ruby. People who were in hiding, or had something to hide, tended not to live in the world's major cities. Sarah would have bet a lot of money on Ruby heading for Mogadishu, to see if Max knew anything.

"At last, she's going to deal with Baba Yaga."

Bring a decent bottle of wine with you, she'd been instructed and not the cheap stuff. It hurt that Ruby considered her to be cheap when it came to buying wine, mainly because it was true. Sarah's website design business was thriving, as was her real time translation software. She'd bought two bottles of good quality wine on the way, one red, one white. Each one was more expensive than her entire amount of benefits she'd once had to survive on for a week. Those had been the bad day, the dark times she was determined would never return. She still liked to think about it though, it was wonderfully grounding. Sarah had keys to Ruby's home and unlike Spider, she wasn't nervous about using them. She opened the street door and stepped into the downstairs hallway.

"I bet that fucking Anna wants to come." She muttered.

Sarah didn't really hate Anna; it was just that they'd both been after Spider at the same time. Spider was no oil painting, but he was hers and there had been a few threats. Now the continued animosity was mainly symbolic, a personal cold war. Sarah smiled as she picked up that slight funky smell on the first-floor landing. Ruby's flat in Hackney really did feel like home. She used her key to open the door to Ruby's home.

"Sarah, perfect timing." Said Ruby. "Help me dish up the food, while Spider opens the wine."

Ruby changed things around occasionally and there were two pictures on a bookshelf now, of Ruby arm in arm with Todd. On the whole though, it was still the home where so many of their plans had been agreed. Not that Ruby always agreed with the consensus. One of her favourite sayings was that they weren't a democracy. Sarah did as she was asked and began taking Thai food out of bags.

"Where is Todd?" She asked.

"Some damned place in the Balkans."

Probably somewhere dangerous. Ruby did seem to have a thing for men who were somewhat dark, mysterious and likely to come home with a few new scars. Or as in the case of Serge, not come home at all.

"Wow, this red wine looks expensive." Said Spider. "Which are we starting with, red or white?"

"Red." Said Sarah, at almost the same time as Ruby.

The food was good and Sarah heard all about the house in Georgia and how they'd travelled there. It was the wine though, that lubricated and eased inhibitions enough for them to talk about difficult things.

"I've heard a few things from people I trust." Said Spider. "Mainly about Lily being abducted."

"Not again Spider.....She isn't being held by British Intelligence." Said Ruby. "I spoke to Foxy about it and I'd know if he was lying, I'm rather good at that sort of thing. He doesn't know where she is. No resignation, no letters to loved ones. She simply packed a couple of cases one morning and vanished."

"Still.....There have been rogue elements in the security services before." Said Sarah. "That was why Foxy was given the job of watching the spies."

"How reliable is your snitch, Spider?" Ruby asked.

"Never let me down before and he knows people. He said she's being held in an enclosed compound in Belgium, somewhere in the city of Landen to be precise."

"Landen is a large City, any idea of a precise location?"

"No, just Landen." Said Spider.

Sarah had never heard of Landen, but Ruby seemed to know something about just about everywhere.

"We can't ignore the lead; we all owe Lily a few favours." Said Ruby. "Alright, we'll add a diversion to Landen into our plans, agreed?"

"Yes, fine." Said Sarah.

"Yeah." Said Spider.

Ruby took a sip of wine and did something she'd begun to do in Africa. She picked up a pen and a notepad from under the coffee table. Sarah had looked at the notebook once, friends being nosy about friends was normal after all. It had been full of a language Sarah didn't know, which was rare. Sarah might be a fuckup at many things, but languages were her thing. It was probably the language of the elders of Ruby's kind, who were all long gone. The now largely forgotten language of the people of Karakum.

"Who goes with us will determine where we go, at least to begin with." Said Ruby. "I can't guarantee they'll accept the invitation, many of the wunderkinds now have businesses to run, a few have children. So, who do we take?"

"Sophie." Said Sarah. "Small but deadly Sophie."

"I've already added her to the list, who else?"

"I know you two don't always get on, but I think we'll need Charlotte." Said Spider.

"I agree." Said Sarah. "She's a bit scary with the whole creature of fire and burning business. But going up against Baba Yaga....We need Charlotte. If she'll agree to go."

"Charlotte now lives in Paris; we sometime pass on the street near the hotel." Said Ruby. "Yet we rarely even meetup for coffee. When I do call her, I can hear the excitement in her voice. Until she realises, I'm not calling for her help in killing Kallina. Then the sullen disinterest returns to her voice. I'm sure Charlie will join us, but do we want her?"

It was a dilemma, saying yes would probably upset Ruby. Sarah looked at Spider and shrugged, in the way they both understood, the you go first shrug.

"Yes, we need her." Said Spider.

"I don't see how we can do this without Charlotte." Said Sarah.

Ruby added a few notes to her book and Sarah hoped they weren't grumbles about the loyalty of her and Spider.

"Very well, I'll ask Charlie to join us." Said Ruby. "We can get her and Sophie to meet us at the hotel in Paris. That means we three can retrace our steps from what feels like several lifetimes ago, when I was trying to find Kurt. We'll use the Eurostar to get to Paris, but this time we can use our own passports and be a lot less covert about the whole business.....Agreed?"

"Oh yes, I love Malou's hotel." Said Sarah.

"Where do we go from there?" Asked Spider.

"Belgium first to see if Lily really is being held there. I will know almost as soon as we arrive in Landen." Said Ruby. "We'll collect a full team then and....."

"Mogadishu, I know you're going to say Mogadishu." Said Sarah.

"It does make sense to find out what Max knows." Said Spider.

"It does and seeing Max is definitely on the agenda." Said Ruby. "There might be a few detours on the way, especially to see Olga.....So, who else do we want to take with us?"

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Ruby Anne Mason boarded the Eurostar train to Paris, three days after her twenty seventh birthday. She'd looked in the mirror quite a lot on the day of her birthday. No wrinkles of course, not a single grey hair in her raven dark mass of hair. Her coffee with a dash of cream skin tone, was flawless. If only she'd been an inch or two taller, but she wasn't complaining. That might continue though and then it might be a problem. Arbiter Nazili Anso had told her she wasn't truly immortal, just very long lived.

“Both you and Charlotte might seem indestructible, but you will eventually die.” He’d told her. “Judging by my own experience, you may well appear as you are now, for a very long time.” Looking good at twenty seven was wonderful, but looking just as good at forty seven.....That would definitely be a problem. Looking good at seventy seven might lead to a mob at the door with pitchforks. She’d even talked to one of Foxy’s people about makeup effects to make her look older. Her logic being that if the security services weren’t experts at disguise, well they damned well should be.

“At least the seats are comfortable.” Said Sarah.

“I think they even do food.” Said Spider.

Ruby just felt relieved that they were all travelling on their own legally obtained passports. Even the money and credit cards in her bag were all legit and in her own name. That alone was almost a cause for celebration. It seemed that every journey overseas had necessitated breaking the law, often in major ways. This time was different, though she had made a few discreet enquiries about the legal status of everyone she intended taking as far as Mogadishu. She’d decided against asking Foxy, just in case he’d found some fool proof way to lie to her, without her knowing. She’d given the list of names to Penny. Officially still the PA to George Polandrous, though she now really ran the London office of The Polandrous Foundation. George and Penny had sources, who worked in other ways than the security services.

“Just two people on the list are of current criminal interest to Europol, or at least are on their database. Spider of course, AKA Rupert Bailey. No stop lists or cautions, just that any activity that brings him in contact with the police, is to be noted.”

“I’d be shocked if he wasn’t on a list. And the other one is ?”

“Anna Kaloyanova, age twenty eight and a Bulgarian citizen. The police forces of several countries, seem to think Anna is some kind of gangster. Not that I’m criticising your choice of friends. Again though, no stop lists for Anna, or caution notices.”

“Nothing serious that I can’t live with Penny. Thanks for your help.”

“Don’t hang up yet Ruby, I saved the best for last, or the worst. I suppose it depends on how you look at it. No stop lists, but Charlotte Mason is on a lot of caution lists.”

There had been a time when Ruby had seen the thirteen listed on a single sheet of paper. It had been in a secret file of the French DGSE, their Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure. The French equivalent of the CIA, though they tended to keep a lower profile. It was the first time Ruby had seen every wunderkind named on a list and for some reason, they’d all been given the second name of Mason. The kids had liked that and used it as badge of honour. All of them now held passports and driver’s licenses under the name of Mason.

“I thought Charlie might be a problem. Tell me the worst, Penny. How bad is it ?”

“Europol obviously consider Charlotte to be employed by a drug cartel. Every time she gets on a plane, or passes through border control somewhere.....Imagine a buzzer going off at Europol.”

“I can work with that....Anything else ?”

“No, that’s it.”

Ruby could deal with one awkward traveller; she’d once had to deal with taking the entire thirteen wunderkinds into China. Charlotte might be living in Paris and using documents under the name of Charlotte Mason, but when they left for Belgium, she’d be using a fake passport under another name.

“Just promise me one things Ruby.” Said Sarah. “No travelling on small boats, I’ve got a thing now about small boats. All that bobbing about, I still feel sick a week after coming ashore.”

“I will do what I can Sarah, but no promises.”

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Anna Kaloyanova had arrived at the hotel two days before Ruby was due to arrive. After Malou had told her there'd be no charge for the room or what she ate in the restaurant, she'd wished she'd arrived a week before. Not that Anna was poor, but free food is free food after all, especially in a four-star hotel. Malou seemed to be like Elvis or Prince, she only appeared to have one name. Delmar had arrived the previous day and after talking to Malou, he'd come looking for her. A little overweight, short too, with an American accent that set her teeth on edge. Despite all that, she'd liked Delmar within a few minutes of meeting him.

“Lau is busy with personal stuff in Korea.” He'd told her. “I get the feeling I got the invitation as first reserve. Not that I mind, I owe Ruby a lot. And personal stuff kept me from going to Africa with her.” Delmar had a certain look about him, the kind of guy whose personal stuff was probably hiding from the cops, or the mob. Anna recognised the look, she had it too. Unless of course, that was Delmar's gift? Maybe he was a kind of mental chameleon? She'd once heard Ruby say that no one can resist having their own image reflected back at them. They were currently sat at a table at the rear of the entrance lobby, watching the door, while trying not to make it obvious that they were watching the door. As the food was free, Anna was eating a second breakfast, or early lunch.

“Can't they do something about your fingers?” Asked Delmar. “I mean.....I heard Nazili has amazing healing powers.”

Anna had lost two fingers from her left hand in Africa, the ring finger and the small finger. A lot of the time there had a dreamlike quality, which had increased over the months she'd been back home. She remembered some dreadful beast biting off her fingers, though that might have been an hallucination. She had no real idea why she didn't want her hand healed; the fingers regrown.

“I don't talk about that.” She snapped.

“Then I won't mention it again. What has Ruby done with Nazili? He's not exactly built to blend in with the crowd.”

“He now lives with Monique in London. Ruby said they're getting on far better than she'd expected.”

“Wow, with Monique.....I hadn't seen that coming. She'll definitely pop his cork, big time.”

They laughed and Anna had already marked him as a man she'd like to get to know a lot better, while they travelled to wherever Ruby was taking them. He looked age appropriate, though she hated the phrase, maybe a little younger than her, in about his mid-twenties. All something to do with being one of Ruby's wunderkinds of course, they were all unusual, to say the least. Anna had seen the files Kallina had kept hidden for decades. Delmar had been born in Chicago in nineteen thirty-four.

Anna was picking at her second breakfast, when she saw Ruby enter the hotel. Of course, neither she or Delmar immediately leapt up to meet her, that would have been a bit.....Tacky.

“I'm glad Spider came.” Said Delmar. “I remember his lessons on street craft with a huge amount of fondness. Good with a gun too, from what I remember. They're travelling light, just one bag each.”

Sarah was with them of course, Sarah and Ruby often seemed to be joined at the hip.

“They'll buy clothes as we travel.....That's what we did last time.” Said Anna. “It's a good way to merge in and look like a local, wherever local happens to be.”

“Yeah, I get that....Good idea.”

Anna sauntered over to where Ruby and the other two were still checking in. She wanted to look casual and Delmar appeared to be copying her. Was that his whammy, his gift? All the coolness faded away, when she was within hugging distance.

"I'm so glad you're here and safe Ruby. Was the tunnel train running properly?"

"Yes, two hours and thirty minutes London to Paris, I even had a nap." Said Ruby.

It all seemed to happen like a well-rehearsed plan after that, though Anna thought it was more a case of Malou keeping everyone informed. By the time Ruby had reached the elevators, Charlotte and Sophie were there. Charlotte looked thinner, but in some way taller, despite not wearing heels. A blonde now, with still the same intensity when she looked at you. No hugging Charlotte, though Anna had to hug Sophie. She was a red head again, hair a shade of red Queen Boudica would have been proud of. Dear Tiny Sophie, who often used weapons taller and heavier than she was.

"So, we're finally going to tie up loose ends." Said Sophie.

"It would seem so." Said Anna.

Ruby pressed the button for the top floor, though that didn't seem to be where they were going. Up some stairs and they were in the staff accommodation area of the hotel. Every room they passed had a different aroma of food, a different type of music playing quietly on a radio. Up a final set of steps and they were on an area of flat roof, high above the streets of Paris. There was Malou, standing next to the table. More food of course, Anna was hoping they didn't stay in Paris too long, or she'd put on a few pounds. Sarah was sort of half leaning over one side of the roof.

"Get it right and you can see the top third of the Eiffel Tower." Said Sarah.

Anna carefully leant out and saw it too.

"The famous view." Said Ruby.

"Are we all here Ruby?" Asked Malou. "I thought Nari was joining us."

"She has baby minding to sort out for little Seong and will join us in Belgium."

Xue was there, the Chinese guy Anna had seen around the hotel. Past middle aged, yet there was a certain look about him. Not the sort of guy to fuck with. There were rumours he'd picked the wrong side in the politics of Hong Kong. A part of the world that reminded Anna of the middle east. Every side was the wrong side at one time or another. He now had his own limo and did the airport run for several of the large hotels. For some reason he ran Malou around for free and treated her like royalty.

"Sit down everyone, the view will still be there later." Said Ruby.

They looked a small group, but Ruby would pick others up on the way, she always did. After all, that was how Anna had joined them. She'd probably have been dead by now if Ruby hadn't freed her from a gangland prison in Tallinn.

"I saw Roger in reception, can someone please go and fetch him." Said Malou.

As no one got up as the young man joined them, Anna assumed he was the wunderkind they were waiting for. A few apologies for being late, it appeared he'd used the bathroom at just the wrong time. From memory she knew Roger was a Brit, born in Leeds in the early nineteen thirties. It was strange to think that the man who looked about twenty five, had been born before the start of the second world war.

"I will keep George up to date, so we seem ready to start." Said Malou. "I'm giving you the chair for this meeting, Ruby."

"Where are we going Ruby?" Asked Charlotte.

"Belgium to find Lily. I've asked Gérard Villand to use his entire team to find the house where she's being held. A house in a compound, with people who don't seem keen on going out much, or being seen. His people will find them quite quickly, I'm sure of it. After all, it's the way the CIA located Bin Laden."

"Supposing they are British security services?" Asked Spider.

“Then we do our best not to bruise them too badly.” Said Ruby. “First things first though, I want you all to buy new clothes. No one leaves in the clothes they arrived in. It might sound paranoid, but it’s thrown people off our trail in the past. Be ready to leave the instant Villand gives us a precise location in Landen.”

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