

## Ruby V : Machu Picchu

### Chapter 21 – The God Of Fire

**“Sarah had long ago stopped thinking in terms of good guys and bad guys, though Spider still used the terms. Even the usually friendly Americans, weren’t going to like a world heritage site being damaged. When the whole world was likely to be a little hostile, your best option was to run and hide. Of course, if you could hide in a five star hotel in Cusco.....”**

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Everyone else had gone; they were just figures now at the far end of the grassy area. Sophie had hung around, out of a mixture of worry for Ruby and good old fashioned curiosity. Ruby had been ignoring her for a few minutes, while touching the solitary standing stone.

“I’m relying on you, if the worst happens.” Said Ruby. “If I’m not around, keep them together and get away from here as quickly as possible. When I begin, every weather satellite in South America will pick it up. A few military satellites will head this way too.”

Everyone had hugged Ruby before leaving, though that didn’t stop Sophie from hugging her again.

“You can’t die, Ruby.....I won’t allow it.” Muttered Sophie.

“Allow it.....Are you going to argue with the fire God ?” Asked Ruby. “I’m not sure if God is the right word. A kind of creative force that formed this planet, before anything living was here. It will know I’m here and what I seek, but knowing me.....I doubt if it thinks any more about us, than we think of crushing an ant under our boot.”

“Then don’t do this, there must be another way.” Said Sophie.

“There isn’t and it has to be done here.” Said Ruby. “This place has been waiting for over four billion years, just in case the fire God needed to be woken.....Now, you need to be with the others.”

“How do you know all this, Ruby ?”

“I just do.....Now, go !”

“Not all the way, I’ll go halfway.” Said Sophie.

“Alright, but be ready to run.”

Sophie went about halfway down the field and watched Ruby rubbing her hands over the stone. Sophie wasn’t too worried about herself, or the other wunderkinds. Some were better at it than others, but they could all move themselves out of the area. Anywhere they could clearly see, they could be there. Cal might end up knee deep in the mud at the bottom of a ditch, though no one would be marking her for artistic style and performance. Alive would be good enough. The humans though, the muggles like Spider and Sarah.....

“Please don’t get this wrong, Ruby.” Sophie Muttered.

An ancient creative force that thrived on an early Earth, a planet of fire and molten rocks. A God who wasn’t what most people think of as a God. No benevolent deity with a beard, sitting on a throne. Instead a formless, yet omnipotent force, that may have given life the first jolt it needed to multiply and survive. It sounded absurd, but there was a vague feeling in Sophie’s mind, almost a memory of someone else’s memory. A race memory of the people of the Karakum, her ancestors. There was a vague feeling that Ruby was right and currently calling upon the most dangerous deity in the multiverse. Sophie sent a message to Eugenie, using their mental link.

‘If things go wrong, grab the muggles and go.....Anywhere you can see. Tell Cal.’

'Are things likely to get that bad ?' Asked Eugenie.

'Maybe.....Be prepared.'

Damn, she was using one of Spider's terms, which he claimed to have learned in the boy scouts. Spider had a lot of weird sayings and Sophie hoped he wasn't about to die, as Machu Picchu exploded into a million pieces.

'Good luck.' Sophie sent to Ruby.

'Thank you.'

Could the whole top come off the mountain ? Sophie wondered, as the ground began to shake. Like a well behaved earthquake, the shifting ground was never quite bad enough to make her fall over. A sound accompanied the shaking ground, a noise like a jet engine, but far, far louder. Ruby stopped rubbing the stone and moved away from it, though if anything, the noise became louder.

"Oh, Ruby.....I hope you know what you're doing." Sophie muttered.

After the first red flame appeared out of the ground, it all happened very fast. First the flames coming through cracks in the ground, some quite close to Ruby. After the flames came the magma, rising out of the cracks and spreading out across the field.

'Ruby.....Run.' Sent Sophie.

'No.....It will stop.'

Stop was one way of putting it, as a huge hole opened in the ground where the standing stone was stood. The stone vanished, as the red hot magma, poured into the hole. Formless meant nothing to see, yet Sophie could see something disturbing the heat rising from the hole. A shape of something huge and it was very close to Ruby.

'Take them to Cusco, Sophie.' Sent Ruby. 'Wait for me there.'

Sophie didn't believe it, when Ruby walked towards the strange shape shimmering in the heat.

About five or six paces and there was only ever going to be one outcome. Ruby fell onto the red hot magma, before vanishing down the hole.

"Ruby." Screamed Sophie and she continued to scream the name of her friend, until Eugenie began to hug her.

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To Sarah, Ruby had been too far away to see clearly, though she had seen her fall onto the boiling magma. No tears, there was too much going on, though there'd be time for tears later. Devastated but calm, she'd been through troubled times before and Ruby had told Sophie she'd meet them in Cusco. At present, Sarah was trying to run down steep, weather worn steps, without falling to her death. Sophie had told everyone that surveillance satellites would soon be there. To some though, it had to sound a little like saying the bogeyman was on his way.

"But, why are we running ?" Asked Thio. "Satellites have fixed positions, don't they ?"

"Not the military ones, Thio." Said Sarah. "We've had trouble in the past with those. You can see drones in the sky, but satellites are up there in space, out of the way and as good as invisible.

Everyone has them, even the North Koreans. They can move their orbits quite quickly. Weather is less of a problem for satellites these days and on a good day.....They'll get a better picture of your face than a seaside photo booth."

"Crap.....I can see why we're running." Said Cal.

"Yeah.....We need to be on the bus and on our way to Cusco." Said Sarah.

Sarah had long ago stopped thinking in terms of good guys and bad guys, though Spider still used the terms. Even the usually friendly Americans, weren't going to like a world heritage site being

damaged. When the whole world was likely to be a little hostile, your best option was to run and hide. Of course, if you could hide in a five star hotel in Cusco.....

“Quicker.....We can merge into the crowd.” Said Spider.

Her partner and hopefully, future father of her children, was having a few problems. He didn't heal as quickly as the wunderkinds and some of the tree shrapnel had gone in deep. Every time he looked like slipping on one of the worn steps, Sarah was there to help.

“At least no one seems to be giving us the stink eye.” Sarah muttered at Spider.

“To them, we're just another group of scared tourists.” Said Spider.

Flames were still rising from the highest point on Machu Picchu, bright crimson flames. The ground had stopped shaking, but there was still the massive sound. It seemed to be coming from somewhere deep in the ground, the sound like a jet engine during take-off. No wonder everyone was running, with seemingly one intention.....To get well away from Machu Picchu. Sophie was back with them, carrying a very relaxed looking Constanze.

“There is a chance.....This whole place might come apart.” Said Sophie. “Those who can need to run and we need to help those who can't.”

Sarah assumed Sophie had meant Spider, until Sophie helped an old lady using a stick. It seemed she'd become separated from her group. Once Sarah understood, Spider was left to get along as best he could. She attached herself to a group from a care home in Lima. Her language skills helped and Sarah soon had them all moving as quickly as they could.

“We have a bus.....You'll need to sit on the floor, but we can get you to Cusco.” Said Sarah.

Mention of Terminal de Buses helped and that it was on Avenue Grau. People tend to trust those with local knowledge and the group of elderly tourists were keen to follow Sarah to the bus. They probably had their own transport somewhere among the chaos of panic and whole families running from the crimson flames. The bus station in Cusco would be a safe place and, in Peru, you could get anywhere from a decent bus station. By the time Sarah was at their bus, a lot of scared tourists, seemed to have been offered a lift on their old and rather grubby bus. Lily was trying to push everyone towards the back.

“Standing room only.....Room for all, but standing room only.” Lily was yelling, in her bad Spanish.

“No.....Standing on these rough roads, with the bus moving at speed.” Yelled Sarah, “There will be a lot of injuries. Get them sat on the floor, Lily. There'll be enough room for everyone.....Just about.”

“Sientate en el piso.” Shouted Sarah. ‘Sit on the floor.’

A mix of nationalities among the tourists, though when the Spanish speakers began sitting on the floor, everyone quickly got the idea. Soon the bus had twice its maximum number of passengers, crammed onto every spare inch of floor space. No room for poor Constanze, who was still clinging onto Sophie.

“Is everyone here, all of our people ?” Yelled Lily. “I don't see Thio.”

“I'm here.” Yelled Thio, from somewhere at the rear on the bus.

“Anyone missing ?” Yelled Sarah.

No answer, so she nodded at Lily, who started the bus.

“Crap....My boyfriend. Caleb isn't on the bus.” Shouted Sophie. “Don't go anywhere; give me a minute or two.”

Petite girls vanishing probably isn't a common sight anywhere, it definitely excited the people crammed onto the bus. Sophie reappeared about five minutes later, holding onto Caleb. His trouser knees were bloody.

“Nothing serious.....I tripped over something.” Said Caleb.

“Any other missing partners ?” Yelled Lily.

Sarah looked for Todd, in case he’d wandered off somewhere, deep in grief. There he was though, sat on the floor at the back of the bus. He was crying and Sarah had always found a man crying to be particularly upsetting. Once they were in a hotel in Cusco, she’d have a long talk with Todd and perhaps, share a decent bottle of tequila.

“No, I counted us all.....Everyone is now here.” Said Cal.

There would be plenty of time to tease Sophie later. Years of time to tease her for almost leaving her own boyfriend behind at Machu Picchu. Lily looked around, as if waiting for someone to disagree with Cal. When there was no dissenting voice, she put their bus in gear and turned the bus around. Not easy on a narrow road, but they were soon heading down hill and in the direction of Cusco.

“Next stop..... Terminal de Buses in Cusco.”

Everyone cheered in whatever language they usually cheered in. The elderly ladies from a care home in Lima, looked particularly pleased.

“I can’t believe we’re leaving Ruby behind.” Muttered Sarah.

“She’ll be fine, tougher than ever.....You’ll see.” Said Spider.

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Ruby fell a long way, ending up in a magma chamber, deep inside the mountain. The noise was there, worse than ever. Like a whirring turbine, a huge whirring turbine. No sign of where it might be, the large chamber was all she could see. A lot of light from the red hot molten rock and areas of the now familiar crimson flames. No fire God, though he was without form and invisible. At least she was alive and despite sitting naked on the magma, there was no pain, none at all. Her clothes had gone, something Charlotte often mentioned. Charlie had commissioned someone to create fireproof underwear.

“Just something to help me retain a little dignity.” Charlie had told her.

As far as the manufacturer knew, Charlie was a stunt woman who’d had a few bad experiences with fire and ending up as good as naked. Not that anyone asks too many questions, when offered large sums of money. The undies worked fine, according to Charlie. The problem was knowing when to wear them. Uncomfortable according to Charlie, not something to be put on every morning, yet.....Situations requiring the creature of flames and burning, tended to be a surprise. Ruby felt her head and decided it could have been worse. She was naked, but her hair hadn’t been burned away.

‘Sophie.....Are you there ?’

Nothing, she hadn’t really expected her mental powers to penetrate a magma chamber deep inside a mountain. Whatever happened, it would be just between her and the fire God, Qalalu Karwancho. He, she, or maybe it, was there. She’d seen magma pushed to one side and the occasional shimmer effect where it walked past the crimson fire. A deity that had existed before there was anyone with a language and there was no point in trying to emote empathy at it. It was a deity who just wouldn’t understand the idea of emotions and empathy. Gratitude though, Qalalu Karwancho would probably understand gratitude. Ruby emoted an intense feeling of being grateful in the fiery chamber. From somewhere quite close, the deity noted her gratitude. It was a start.

“No words, no common emotions.....Why is nothing ever easy.” Ruby mumbled.

Her voice was different in the super-heated air, squeaky, as though she’d been breathing helium. It was going to be like trying to talk to an alien. People talked about connecting with pets though and they had no language and often very little in the way on consciousness. If Cal could communicate in some way with Constanze, a deity should be a piece of cake.

“I can do this.” She mumbled.

Ruby walked closer to the shimmer, which was her only way of knowing where Qalalu Karwancho was. She didn't hurt, no pain or aches at all. Feeling her face proved it, every bit of damage from the bullet was gone. So concerned by being in a world of fire, she hadn't realised the fire had healed her. Even a long standing minor ache in her knee, was now gone. Ruby emoted gratitude again and it was genuine. The answer was a question.....The deity wanted to know why she'd called upon him, or her, or it.

"If only you knew a little English." She muttered.

She visualised Charlie in the form of the creature of flames and burning. Ruby then visualised that creature attacking her, burning her, killing her. Like a repeating film loop, she ran the idea of being killed by the creature, over and over again. The fire God was supposed to be clever, it had to understand. On the last loop, she stopped at the image of her ashes. Ruby emoted sadness, bordering on melancholy. Qalalu Karwancho had to understand.

"Alright.....Now we do that all again." She muttered.

Something touched her, physically touched her on the side of her face that had been shot. It was emoting back at her, a feeling of.....Understanding. A deity with almost limitless power, had actually understood her. Ruby never did manage to remember much after that. There had been a little pain, though mostly she felt changed. And powerful.....Which was a wonderful feeling. When she was next fully conscious she was still naked. She was in the centre of a field with a single standing stone in its centre. In the distance were the lights of a large city. Ruby knew where she was, with the same certainty that she knew her own name.

"Cusco." She muttered.

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After dropping off their unintended passengers at the bus station, they'd booked into a five star hotel in the centre of Cusco. Actually it hadn't been that easy or straightforward, life rarely is. One of their new friends had needed medical attention and two hadn't been able to find buses going to where they needed to be. Todd had suggested buying everyone food and making sure they looked well enough to travel. Eugenie had been pleased that Todd was showing an interest. He'd looked to be in a world of his own for a while, obviously concerned about Ruby. It had been Todd who'd hired taxis to take home the two tourists from Machu Picchu, who hadn't been able to find buses. It had taken several hours to sort out their unintended passengers on the bus. Eugenie would have been happy to book a cheap bed & breakfast for the night, but Sophie had been insistent.

"Ruby said to book into a five star hotel, so we're going to do just that." Sophie had said.

It helped in a way, a way of saying they were waiting for Ruby to arrive, rather than mourning her passing. Could even Ruby Anne Mason survive being buried under red hot magma ? Eugenie closed her mind to the possibility that Ruby wouldn't be there soon, with Todd in the room booked for them.

The hotel was great, the rooms the perfect size. Not like a barn, but definitely enough room to swing a cat, as Spider said. Had there once been a cult of hotel room cat swingers ? Eugenie had no idea, but all sayings started from a tiny seed of truth. Eugenie hadn't forgotten events at Machu Picchu; she thought it would be in her mind until the day she died. It was funny how the necessities of eating and finding shelter could take priority over her thoughts. She was in the hotel reception area with Lorenzo, when a TV on the wall, brought her back from thinking about the great meal in the hotel restaurant.

"Wow, it's still going on." Said Lol. "The pictures remind me of volcanic eruptions."

"Yes, like flowing magma in somewhere like Iceland." Said Eugenie.

“Sophie seems to think it will stop once Qalalu....Whatever has finished doing whatever very ancients Gods do.” Said Eugenie.

“Does that mean Ruby is still there ?”

“Probably.....That seemed to be her plan.” Said Eugenie. “None of us know for certain, but all the hot lava and flames, could well be a good sign.”

The interesting thing was, that there was no warning. No small telepathic link of one or two words, nothing. That in itself was weird, Ruby always tried to let her wunderkinds know what was going on. The clothing was weird too, really strange. As Eugenie went into the room she was going to share with Lol for a week, it looked as though a man was sat on their bed. It was the clothing of course, the overall denim effect. Denim jeans, denim shirt and denim jacket. All far too large for the woman dressed in them. Even the work boots Ruby was wearing, were at least three or four sizes too big for her.

“Hello, sorry if I made you jump.” Said Ruby.

“Oh, you’re alright.” Said Eugenie.

“We were so worried.....Everyone is worried.” Added Lol.

Eugenie hugged Ruby and her skin was like ice. Warm days but cold night was the normal for that part of Peru, they’d all noticed that. It was probably about ten degrees outside, cold if you didn’t have an overcoat.

“Crap, Ruby.....You’re freezing.” Said Lol. “Did you walk all the way from Machu Picchu ?”

“And these clothes.....Your own clothes are here. I’ll go and get you something.” Said Eugenie.

“No.....Stay, you can go and get my clothes later.” Said Ruby. “I’m keen on seeing Todd, of course I am. I want to hug everyone.....Eventually. First things first, is everyone alright ?”

“Yes, though Caleb took a tumble.” Said Lol.

“Damaged knees, nothing too serious.” Said Eugenie. “Personally.....I think he enjoys Sophie fussing around him.”

“She forgot him.....Sophie almost left Caleb behind.” Said Lol.

“That sounds like our Sophie.” Said Ruby.

It was so nice to have her back and in one piece, that it took Eugenie a few minutes to notice.

“Your face.....It’s completely healed.” Said Eugenie.

“Yes.....A side effect I think, of what was done to me.” Said Ruby. “Even a few aches and pains I’ve had since being a kid, have all vanished.”

“I have to ask, where did you get the clothes ?” Asked Eugenie. “They are erm.....”

“Are a bit smelly.” Lol added.

“The first house I came to.” Said Ruby. “Naked and cold out, so I let myself in. These clothes were in a dirty washing basket. Not very pleasant, but better than arriving here naked.....Please go and get my clothes, Eugenie.....Anything will do.”

“Yes, I’ll go and tell Todd you’re here and get you a.....Skirt or trousers ?” Asked Eugenie.

“A skirt and nice underwear.....Denim is surprisingly uncomfortable if you’re not wearing knickers.” Said Ruby.

“I’ll bring you a choice.”

“Great, I’ll now use your shower.” Said Ruby. “No letting anyone come and shout at me through the door.....I hate that.”

“Don’t worry; I’ll fight them off if I have to.” Said Lol.

“Wonderful.” Said Ruby.

There was the clack sound as Ruby locked the bathroom door. Eugenie looked at Lol and had to grin.

“Well.....I don't think there's much wrong with our Ruby.” She said.

“How do you think she got here ?” Asked Lol.

“We may never know.”

Maybe Ruby had used some sort of teleport gift, or simply ran very, very fast. Neither option was too weird to be the truth, not for Ruby. Eugenie walked past the room Spider and Sarah were sharing and headed for the stairs. Down one floor and tell Todd first, he deserved to be told first. Sophie would soon sense Ruby's presence and simply turn up, as would Cal. The others ? Any Eugenie didn't see walking around the hotel, would hear by word of mouth. She gave it under an hour until everyone was there.....In her room, the one she shared with Lol.

“There goes our romantic evening.” Eugenie muttered. “And ordering one of everything from room service.”

After roughing it slightly in the bus, the thought of five star twenty four seven room service.....

“Tomorrow night.....I'll lock our room door and ignore anyone knocking or calling.” She mumbled.

Down the stairs one floor, Ruby and Todd were in room fifteen, while she and Lol were in room twenty two. A chance in a million, Lily was using the stairs to go up a floor. Eugenie held Lily's hand and hugged her.

“What is it ? What happened ?” Asked Lily.

“Ruby.....Back and fully healed.” Said Eugenie. “She's in my room taking a shower, number twenty two.”

“Does Todd know ?”

“On my way to tell him and get Ruby some clean clothes.”

Another quick hug and Eugenie turned left after the stairs and knocked on the door of room fifteen. A night for squeezing hands. Todd looked so upset as he answered the door, that Eugenie grabbed his hand and squeezed it.

“She's fine, Todd.” Said Eugenie. “Ruby is back and taking a shower in my room. I'm going to get her some clean clothes.”

Poor Todd, he didn't seem to be taking it in. Eugenie kissed his cheek and hugged him.

“Ruby is fully healed, Todd.....In my room and waiting for you.”

“Yes...Her clothes aren't unpacked.” Said Todd.

“I'll find something.....Go.....I'll be fine.”

Someone had sort of unpacked a few things. Eugenie found an empty bag and put two skirts in it, a couple of tops and a small selection of knickers and bras.

“Hmmm.....Give her a bit of choice.” She mumbled.

The rooms had all the toiletries anyone could ever need. A quick look through another case and Eugenie added two pairs of flat(ish) shoes to the bag and some socks. That would do, Ruby would probably be in her own room with Todd by bedtime. On the way back to her own room, Eugenie knocked on Sarah and Spider's door. More hugs and hand squeezing, which Eugenie noticed worked well. Someone you wanted to know the coming conversation was about something huge....Give their hand a squeeze.

“What is it ?” Asked Sarah.

“Are the police in the lobby ?” Asked Spider.

Typical bloody Spider !

“Ruby is here, showering in my room.” Said Eugenie. “I'm on my way there with some clean clothes for her.”

“Fantastic news.” Said Spider.

Sarah was all over her, hugging her and sobbing as she hugged.

"We'll go with you, right now." Said Sarah. "Is she alright?"

"Yes, good as new.....Even her face has been healed." Said Eugenie.

Thio joined them further along the corridor; he'd heard the good news from Lily. By the time Eugenie opened the door to her room, everyone appeared to be there.

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The hotel hadn't been keen on Constanze and her cat carrier being in her room, until Ruby had talked to the manager. Money may have changed hands, Cal wasn't sure. It was nice to not have to try and hide her pet. Yes, she now definitely thought of Constanze as hers. Not that anyone really owns a cat. More a kind of flatmate arrangement.

"And stay in the room today, no following me to the museum." Said Cal.

"Wow, can you really get her to obey you?" Asked Lily.

"No, not a chance, though I keep trying." Said Cal. "I guarantee she'll be with us when we stop at a coffee place. She used to follow Kallina around."

Cal and Lily had begun going out to places together and sometimes Thio joined them. Cusco seemed to be a safe and friendly city, but going somewhere alone had never appealed to Cal. Lily seemed to feel the same way, so they'd become tourist buddies. Reception had already called her room to say Thio was waiting for them.

"Come on, kiss Constanze goodbye." Said Lily. "Thio will start to wonder if we're ever going to turn up."

Cal pushed her face into the grey fur of her cat. It was always there, the slight smell of jasmine.

Constanze really was a strange cat, who probably still had a few secrets.

"Be good." Cal told her cat.

Thio was sat in reception, watching the wide screen near the reception desk. The eruption at Machu Picchu was still the main item on the local news. Even if you didn't speak Spanish, the pictures told the story. Days of crimson flames and boiling magma, followed by at least a lull, hopefully an end to volcanic activity.

"It looks like the eruption is over." Said Thio.

"Ruby thinks he's gone.....the God of fire." Muttered Lily.

They were always careful when talking in the hotel, a lot of locals understood English. Everything was said in a whisper, or a low mutter.

"Taxi or are we walking?" Asked Cal.

"Walk.....It's a lovely day." Said Lily.

Only two more days in Cusco, two more days of genuinely being tourists. Just about everyone had settled into a pattern of galleries, museums and a little shopping. Food too of course, they were all talking about needing to diet once they were back in Lima.

"We never did get tickets for a theatre." Said Lily.

"Good.....My Spanish is about as good as your Somali." Said Cal.

"Point taken." Muttered Lily.

The previous evening, they'd agreed to visit the Inka Museum (Museo Inka). As usual they'd make a day of it, leaving time for a proper restaurant in the evening. As Lily pointed out several times, none of them might pass that way, ever again. The museum was just over the road from the Cathedral, which they'd already been to, or done as Thio liked to put it. They knew the area and Cal liked the idea of revisiting a couple of decent clothes shops. The walk took them a while, but as Lily had pointed out, it was a lovely day.



“Well.....The outside looks nice.” Said Thio.

There was an admission fee, which Lily had already taken care of. The museum was built around an airy, open central square. Lots of long rooms with glass cases and archaeological finds on tables. Statues and carvings particularly interested Cal, after their time at Ellie’s dig site. The lighting could have been better, but all in all, Cal loved the place.

“I could spend weeks here.” She muttered.

“You’ll have to make do with a day.” Said Thio. “There must be a gift shop with books, everywhere has a gift shop.”

Surprisingly, Cal saw the woman first, despite being obsessed with a few of the Inca carvings. Young and well dressed, a typical tourist. She even had a young man with her and they were exchanging comments about a particularly large statue.

“It’s her.....Charlotte.” Said Cal.

“Are you sure ?” Asked Thio.

“Of course I am.....She’s changed her hair, but I can see the creature of flames inside her.” Said Cal.

“If a woman changes her hair, she becomes invisible.....I know her though.” Said Lily.

To Cal, getting closer was irresistible. She knew Charlie; they’d travelled together and fought together in Norway. If Ruby said she was now an enemy, she was an enemy, though that didn’t stop Cal being curious.

“We should be careful.” Said Lily.

“She’s obviously come here to talk to us.....So, let’s talk to her.” Said Cal.

Cal strode up to the couple, placing herself between the young man and Charlie. He was totally human, with no ability to block his mind. Gerald was his name, a student from Britain who Charlie had picked up in Lima. He was now following her around like some kind of pet. Good cover for Charlie, people travelling alone still invited attention from the busy-body fraternity. Cal picked up that they were sharing a bed. Good old Charlie, satisfying a need for cover and other more intimate needs.

“Hello, Charlie.....Been a while.” Said Cal.

“It has.....I think you’ve grown.”

“No, like Sophie.....I’m as big as I’m ever likely to get.” Said Cal.

“Don’t tell her that. Deep down, I’m sure Sophie thinks she’ll be a seven foot tall Valkyrie, one day.”

Cal hugged Charlie, it was impossible not to. Could you be ready to kill someone at the slightest provocation, yet still like them ? It was obviously possible, like believing in two conflicting ideas and not going crazy.

“Ruby not with you.....Is she in Cusco ?” Asked Charlie.

Just for a second, Cal picked up a few shallow thoughts from her and Charlie was confused. She really had no idea where Ruby was, yet Ruby was sat in a hotel within walking distance. Cal would have once said it was impossible, yet it was the only explanation. Ruby could now block Charlie from knowing her location. As Lily went to talk, Cal grabbed her arm.

“Don’t like to be rude, but so much to see.....And all that.” Said Cal.

“Where is Ruby ?” Yelled Charlie.

Cal was sure she hadn’t read the situation wrong. Thio went to speak and Charlie wasn’t going to be angry and confused for long. One look into Thio’s mind and she’d know what had happened to Ruby and where she was. Not really a disaster, but every piece of information kept away from an enemy, was a small victory. Cal couldn’t remember who’d said that, but she’d read it somewhere. Risky, but she didn’t think Charlie was ready to start her war, at least not there in the museum. Cal put her

finger on Gerald's forehead and mentally instructed him to sleep. It worked, she was sure it would. Cal had been practising her skills and was getting better all the time. Charlie's young man fell to the ground and as Cal had hoped, she grabbed him before he hit the floor.

"We're going now, Charlie." Said Cal. "Don't try to stop us.....I won't allow it."

"You won't allow....." Yelled Charlie.

People were taking an interest in them and Cal could feel her heart beating like crazy. They were probably close to Charlie becoming the creature of flames and the entire building becoming a pile of ash and heat cracked stones. At the moment though, Charlie had no idea where Ruby was, or even if she was still alive. Charlie glared, but there was no burning, no inferno.

"Outside, Lily.....We're leaving." Said Cal. "Thio.....Flag down the first taxi you see.....Stand in front of them if you have to."

Charlie didn't follow them outside, though getting well away from the museum became an increasingly good idea. Clusters of tourists were forming, some pointing at them and muttering to one another. Cal sensed a CCTV recording device and used just enough energy to turn it into a warped metal box, full of burned circuitry. There might be other recorders though, being fed from different cameras.

"We need that taxi, Thio." Shouted Cal.

"I see one.....Here we go." Said Thio.

A large SUV being used as a taxi, it even had aircon running. Cal got the others into the back, while she continued to watch for Charlie. No sign of her, she was probably flagging down a taxi herself, on the far side of the museum. As the taxi pulled away, Cal allowed herself to relax. She leant back into the comfortable seat and actually sighed.

"How dangerous is that lady?" Asked Thio.

It broke the atmosphere; Cal looked at Lily and laughed. They could have died; several blocks of Cusco could have been a hole in the ground. Cal was expecting Lily to tell her off, even give her a little bit of her 'damned amateurs,' speech. Instead Lily grabbed her hand.

"Well done, Cal.....That was.....Incredibly scary, but you were bloody marvellous." Said Lily.

"I'm hungry, being terrified always make me hungry." Said Thio.

"Charlie won't expect it.....If we got out two streets away." Said Cal. "I did notice we walked past a Starbucks on the way here. What do you think?"

"Sounds good to me." Said Thio.

"Daft and ridiculous.....Let's do it." Said Lily.

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Everyone had helped to clean out the bus before leaving Cusco. Not proper cleaning of course, just gathering up the detritus accumulated over weeks on the roads of Peru. Fast food containers, dead batteries, old newspapers and all sorts of general garbage. All of it went into bin bags, to be placed in dumpsters. Not their dumpsters of course, there were plenty of them behind hotels and supermarkets. Ruby had asked Sophie to organise the bus cleaning, but once everyone got the idea, it took on a life of its own. Cal had scraped up the remains of something Constanze had carried onto their bus. It looked to have once been a mouse. Lily had even emptied a tin of air freshener inside the bus, before locking it up for the night.

"Yes, that's much better. Well done, Sophie." Said Ruby. "I was dreading the long drive back to Lima."

Sophie knew she wasn't good at reading the room, or even giving it a casual perusal. The faces giving her a certain look though.....

"It was very much a group effort." Said Sophie. "Cal has wedged three litter trays under the large back seat, so we're hoping Constanze uses them."

"Very nice everyone.....A good job." Said Ruby.

Sophie had checked the bus over. Not in a mechanical way, though it probably needed a good service when they were back in Lima. Sophie had looked for trackers mainly; there were several organisations who'd love to know their whereabouts. Non technology based tackers too, good old fashioned spells and cantrips. Old school methods of following them, the kind loved by Charlotte. Sophie had found nothing, apart from a very small oil leak.

"We've all spent time picking up crap." Shouted Lily. "So, let's keep the litter off the floor, people." Lily and Todd were taking it in turns to drive, based on mileage covered. Not that anyone was going to monitor the bus's odometer. Todd had used red marker on a paper map, and Lily had agreed to the changeover points. It all seemed over the top, but as Ruby had said.....

"Anything.....Anything that stops them fighting over it."

Everyone settled into their usual seats, like a college football team on the way to yet another game. Eugenie seemed to remember something important. Lorenzo had once made a comment about her occasional ditzy moments, making their relationship work.

"Fuck.....We left a hire car." Said Eugenie. "Lorenzo and myself left a hire car at the dig site."

"Yes, I remember.....A blue four door." Said Lorenzo.

"Was it hired under your real name ?" Asked Ruby.

Sophie always enjoyed a little schadenfreude, the emotional experience of pleasure in response to another's misfortune. Not that she wished Eugenie or Lorenzo any harm, but a little shame and embarrassment was a different matter. Ruby had banned the use of fake identities. On the other hand, if the car had been hired under Lorenzo's real name.....There could be problems, serious problems.

"No.....I used a fake ID." Said Lorenzo.

"Good.....Can everyone check they haven't hired anything in Cusco ?" Asked Ruby. "If you have, we can wait while you return it."

"Sorry.....With the battle and everything." Said Eugenie. "I fucked up."

"I'll call Ellie and let her know." Said Ruby. "One of the students, Mars more than likely, can dump it in the woods.....Now, are we ready to leave ?"

Lily swivelled her head about, as if expecting another embarrassing revelation. When none came, she put the bus in gear and drove out of the car park. Not the hotel car park, the bus had been parked at the edge of town, after the business with Charlie at the museum.

"I love that sound, the tyres rumbling over asphalt." Said Spider. "The sound of heading home."

"Alessia House.....Feels like going home." Said Sarah.

Cal had Constanze on her lap, stroking the incredibly elderly cat. They were back on the road again and Sophie was looking forward to it.

"We'll be stopping for coffee in Quiquijana." Said Lily.

"Where ?" Asked Caleb.

"Quiquijana.....Yes, I have been practising the name." Said Lily.

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