

## Ruby V : Machu Picchu

### Chapter 16 – The Tomb

**“Cal was the talk of the camp, though that might not last long. A group of post grad students with heaps of energy and varied sexual interests. Lily thought Cal would be old news before breakfast time in the morning.”**

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Ellie Nicholas was still in the tomb, sat on the dusty stairs that gave access to a room with an empty sarcophagus. Her doctoral thesis had been praised by several renowned people in her field, she wasn't a fool. It was the tomb prepared for Baba Yaga, the deathless witch. Her ashes were supposed to rest in an urn, inside the tomb. What then though ? That was causing all the arguments. Next to Ellie was a half full jug of coffee, brought to her by one of the post grad students. They'd brought her cheese on toast too, another first. Her mother had often described her as adversarial for the sake of it. Ellie had always denied it, but now.....She was getting a good head of steam up in her row with Ruby Mason.

“I can understand you wanting to seal the tomb, Ruby.” She said. “You have to realise it's unique in all of South America. My team must be allowed to photograph and document the interior. It can all be done in two days, maybe three.”

“Three days !” Said Sarah. “For a few pictures....That's crazy.”

“Good archaeology takes time.” Snapped Tilda. “Take shortcuts and you'll end up with crap records.” They'd argued a few times, sometimes Cal had joined in. In a way it was a relief to let them rant at each other, while Ruby and her took a break. Ruby looked at her and smiled.

“Alright.....Alright.” Yelled Ellie. “I think we might achieve more if it's just Ruby and myself in here.”

“You can't just throw us out.” Said Cal.

“We found the tomb.” Muttered Spider.

“Actually.....I agree with Ellie.” Said Ruby. “With just the two of us, we might get a solution to the impasse, this side of the next ice age. Please everyone.....Go and get on with your day.”

“Me too ?” Asked Sophie.

Ruby hugged Sophie and whispered something to her, before she left the tomb. Ellie was quite surprised how quickly everyone else left. Even Tilda didn't need shouting at or persuading. Ellie poured a cup of reasonably warm coffee and handed it to Ruby.

“Made an hour ago, but it still tastes alright.” Said Ellie.

“Thanks, I like coffee that takes the plaque off your teeth.” Said Ruby.

A long silence, with them both drinking coffee that was long past its best. As the one in charge of the dig, Ellie thought it was up to her to offer a solution.

“I understand Ruby, and believe it or not, I'm on your side.” Said Ellie. “My team spend days taking pictures and writing notes, which they send back to the university. Then someone wants to come here and do a full survey of the very unique, one of a kind tomb. I can see how that would be a nightmare for you.”

“I can bury the tomb, deep enough to put off a casual treasure seeker, but nothing can ever be hidden forever.” Said Ruby. “I know that, but I'd like Baba Yaga to have at least a century or two to

rest in peace. Together.....I'm sure we can come up with a plausible story about how the tomb was destroyed."

"There are rumours, Ruby. My students are all bright postgrads. The worst people to be among if you've a secret to keep. Though no one is yelling witchcraft, we know there's something going on.....I'm sure you're following me....."

"I am.....The tomb can be pushed deep and then sealed." Said Ruby. "Really deep, it'll take a lot to dig down to it, though one day an earthquake might bring it back up. There is no telling....But I hope it happens, if it happens, a long time in the future. I'm sure even Tutankhamen realised someone like Howard Carter would arrive someday, to disturb his rest."

Ellie was about to suggest something that might end her career, perhaps even end up with the police arresting her. It wasn't the money Ruby had given the dig though, it was Ruby herself. Every time Ruby smiled at her, she felt the need to help her, to protect her as best she could.

"We're two clever women." Said Ellie. "I'm sure we can invent a reason the tomb was destroyed. There are flash floods in the area; whole buildings can be washed away. Ground tremors cause subsidence and deep, gaping sink-holes.....I'm sure we can agree on something for the official report."

Mars entered the tomb and looked at both of them, as if waiting to be invited in or told to go away. Being Mars, she decided to take silence as permission to speak.

"I was treating the wounded man called, Luis." Said Mars. "The one Lily and Thio carried into the camp. I'm afraid he died of his wounds.....My first patient and he died."

"Did he say anything?" Asked Ruby.

"Not really.....He mumbled about someone called the Colonel, but most of it was garbled. Lily came and talked to him for a while. Shall I go and get Lily."

"Not right now, maybe later." Said Ellie.

Dead men now, killed by gunfire. Life was never dull with Ruby and her people in the camp. Mars vanished, leaving them alone.

"I like the sink-hole idea." Said Ruby. "Explains everything and difficult to verify. Take your pictures; my people can even help if you need them. If you need three days, that's fine. We will need a private moment to place Baba Yaga's ashes in the tomb and say our goodbyes."

"I understand, I'll hold a meeting for the students that'll get us all out of your hair." Said Ellie.

"You're welcome to see what happens, but only you." Said Ruby. "Once Baba Yaga's ashes are dealt with, we can leave you in peace. I will be making an extra donation to your contingency fund."

There was something about having Ruby around; Ellie was going to miss her when she left. The woman seemed to exude confidence and positive energy. Ellie wasn't even alarmed when she offered to deal with the man killed by gunfire.

"We'll tidy everything up, every loose end." Said Ruby. "It'll be as if we had never been here."

Ellie found that hard to believe, but when Ruby smiled at her, she smiled back. A sink-hole swallowed the find of the century.....The university might just about believe it.

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Sophie felt Eugenie was close, before seeing the car enter the dig site. With Eugenie and Lorenzo being undercover and in the background, she hadn't spoken to them for a while. There had been a call to say they were on the way, though little had been said. Ruby had insisted everyone used the old school rules so beloved of the late Gérard Villand. Assume all phone calls were being listened to and keep every call short and simple. As the car went to the far side of the car park and stopped

behind a group of large bushes, Sophie knew the fun was about to start. She actually ran over to them, hugging Eugenie as she got out of the car.

"It's so good to see you.....Both of you." Said Sophie.

"We brought you a present." Said Lorenzo.

"I know, I can feel him in the boot." Said Sophie. "He's very angry and desperate for a pee."

"Mitch.....We grabbed him in Lima." Said Eugenie. "A bit bruised and dented, but otherwise.....As nasty and tough as any member of the Colonel's cult."

"Good....We had one called Luis, but Lily shot him and eventually, he died of it." Said Sophie.

Lorenzo opened the boot and it was a mess. A box of rifles that had obviously slewed about on corners and a lot of loose stuff. Quite a few burger boxes and one or two half litre bottles of water.

"Wow, I can tell you didn't take it easy over rough ground." Said Sophie.

"In our defence, we were in a hurry." Said Eugenie.

Mitch needed digging out and he didn't look happy. Red face, bulging neck veins and eyes that promised death if he was bounced over any more bad roads. Eugenie one side and her on the other, they lifted Mitch up and out of the crap he'd become buried under. They sat him on the edge of the boot, though Eugenie hesitated before pulling the duct tape off his mouth.

"Look Mitch, no one within hundreds of miles will care what happens to you." Said Eugenie. "There are kids around though, who don't want to hear you swearing and making threats. Do you understand?"

He nodded twice and Eugenie did the obligatory quick pull to remove the tape. Mitch grunted, but didn't begin yelling or threatening them.

"Oh, I need a pee.....I've needed one for hours." Said Mitch.

Sophie had bought a multi-tool in Lima, one of those Swiss Army knives. Legitimately a tool for hobbies, but with a blade sharp enough to open a major artery, if required. It took a while to cut all the duct tape binding Mitch, while he looked stiff, bruised and generally uncomfortable.

"I'm like her." She said, nodding at Eugenie. "Try to run and we will catch you and we will hurt you. Pick a bush where we can still see you and have a pee."

Poor Mitch could hardly walk, Sophie almost felt sorry for him. Bashed over the head, dumped in a car boot and then driven fast over rough ground. He walked slowly towards the closest bush, keeping his back to them. When he peed, it sounded like there was a gallon that needing draining over the bush. A slightly happier looking Mitch came back to them.

"Alright....We'll feed you, get you a drink and give you the chance to clean up a bit." Said Eugenie.

"Behave and this will all be painless, you have my word."

"Ruby will want to see him once she's finished her meeting." Said Sophie.

Mitch wasn't going to be trying to run; his walk was a kind of shuffle. Eventually he'd be alright again, though it might take a while. Sophie walked in the direction of the refectory tent, while Mitch slowly followed.

"Are we taking the guns?" Asked Lorenzo.

"Hmmm, they might be handy, though I can see Ruby getting upset." Said Sophie. "Best if we ask her first."

Mitch had an image of a nearby large house in his mind, which backed up what Mars had heard Luis muttering about. He didn't know it, but Mitch had given them some vital information.

"Do you like cheese on toast, Mitch?" Asked Sophie. "I do a wicked cheese on toast."

"Yeah, it's alright." Said Mitch.

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Cal knew there were dangers in the woods, men dressed as police and cult members with wild, paranoid delusions. Just her sort of people once, but not anymore. If nothing else, Ruby had given her a reason to get out of bed in the morning and even better, it was a sane reason. Once the arguments appeared to have ended, Cal had grabbed a camera and headed towards the woods. Why? She'd seen quite a few small mammals in amongst the bushes and wanted to know what they were and if they were suitable for her experiments in sending them to limbo and hopefully, back again. She meant the creatures no harm, but docile mammals who weren't known to be overly aggressive, were high on her list of appropriate test subjects. A friend in Somalia had once kept pet rats, boasting that none of them had ever bitten her. They'd certainly bitten Cal, right down to a finger bone on one occasion. She wanted creatures that were the right size for her cage and hopefully, totally harmless. She'd asked Tilda to join her, but her new friend seemed angry with everyone, including Professor Nicholas. Cal had come to the conclusion that Tilda could be a little high maintenance.

"All I need is myself and a camera." She muttered.

Abe used to accuse her of going off into daydreams, often getting to the market on foot, yet not remembering the journey. Her mind did wander, but often those times were when she came up with her best ideas. She saw things that looked roughly like rabbits, which weren't rabbits. Things like rats, which in all probability were rats. Lots of small mammals that ran up into the tree canopy, before she could aim and focus her camera. Some looked like a mixture of a rabbit and a squirrel. "Those are the Vizcacha.....They'll fit inside the cages." Cal mumbled.

They were just about perfect in size and shape. According to several of the students at the camp, they were also docile and not prone to biting fingers to the bone. Cal wanted a choice though, a variety of test creatures. She didn't see it as exploiting the Peruvian wildlife and more as giving them a free trip to another world. Cal wandered out of one set of woods, across a road and into a neglected orchard. Lots of overgrown trees, in rows next to dead ones. A few trees had gone over, blocking pathways. She found herself taking pictures of the strange and twisted trees.

"Beautiful." She muttered.

Past the orchard was a ruined barn full of spiders' webs, which again, had to be photographed. On through the barn that looked about ready to fall down and Cal couldn't quite believe what was in front of her. It was in the centre of a gravel driveway, next to a neglected looking house, or villa, or hacienda....Depending on what such places were called in Peru. Blue and quite new looking, it must have cost a fortune to get it delivered and then collected again. It was a dumpster, a large and impressive looking dumpster. Cal blinked a few times, in case it was an illusion. The dumpster was still there, even when she rapped her knuckles against the metal side. It made a dull thud kind of noise.

"It's mine.....Someone up there, intended it for me." She muttered.

Up came the lid and it wasn't empty, but neither was it anywhere near full. A smell of rotting food waste, which was to be expected. As far as Cal knew, the nearest town offering a dumpster service, or pretty much any other service, was Jauja. Whoever was living in the house had more money than sense. Most would have simply burned their junk and buried what wouldn't burn.

"It can't be a coincidence, here in the middle of nowhere." She mumbled.

If Baba Yaga could leave her a cat and a whole pile of witchcraft powers, then a dumpster wasn't that much of a stretch. Part of Cal realised that destroying it would be reported to the cops, bound to be. She was at the side of the house though, with no windows directly overlooking the drive. It would need to be done fast though.

“Quick, fast and brutal.” Cal muttered.

It occurred to Cal that Spider was affecting her. To her at that moment Quick Fast & Brutal sounded like a firm of solicitors specialising in quickie divorces. The notion made her chuckle.

“Well dumpster.....I won't be hanging around to un-crush you.”

It was Ruby's fault really, promising to buy her a dumpster to crush and then not following through on the deal. That was it, it wasn't her fault at all.....Ruby had as good as forced her to do it. Cal looked at the shiny new dumpster, with its immaculate blue paint. She concentrated and drew power from somewhere she didn't fully comprehend. All of it was aimed at the dumpster from every side. Her hands were the same; she knew that, they were still her hands. As she lifted them and focused power on the dumpster, she saw the gnarled ancient hands of Baba Yaga.

“Crush.....Crush for me.....Tiny as you'll go.” Yelled Cal.

The noise was incredible, as metal folded, buckled and broke apart. Cal pushed the broken parts into the ball of debris, which had begun to spin. Still she crushed it, ignoring the immense amount of noise her project was creating. Now she'd started the dumpster didn't just need to be crushed, it needed to be unrecognisable. After about fifteen minutes, though it might have been longer, Cal stopped pushing power into the spinning ball of crushed metal. She was sweating, more of it going down her back than after a five mile jog over rough ground.

“Yes.....Perfect.” She yelled.

It still looked blue, which shouldn't have surprised her, yet it did. Small, though the whole point had been to crush it. A large metal dumpster about a third full of assorted rubbish. It was now an ugly looking ball of metal, about eighteen inches across. Cal looked at the result of her efforts and was immensely pleased. So pleased that she never noticed the man come around the side of the house.

“What.....What happened ?” He yelled.

Of course he didn't think the girl in front of him had created all that noise, he'd arrived after her project was complete. Dressed all in blue with an assault rifle over his shoulder, Cal knew he was one of the Colonel's cult members. So agitated, his thoughts were hitting her in waves. He was worried that he'd come alone, that he didn't understand what had occurred, that he didn't know what to do with the girl. Then he decided and Cal knew he intended to shoot her.

“Don't do it.....You'll regret it.” She shouted.

Old Cal, the girl who'd killed so easily in Baku, had changed. She wasn't suddenly into the sanctity of human life, or anything like that. It was just that using the appropriate response to a threat, meant less to tidy up afterwards and fewer consequences. Consequences.....The word Ruby used when she really meant piles of trouble to sort out. Consequences were never good in their world, they were always trouble. Cal lifted the man up, as he tried to use his assault rifle. So easy to squash him or send him up to a thousand feet or so and, simply let him drop. No, Cal crushed his rifle first, turning it into a useless piece of metal and plastic.

“Sorry.” She muttered.

Call still had a lot of stored power from crushing the dumpster. She used a tiny bit of it to send the man hurtling against the wall of the building. A bit too much force, though she knew he was alive. Maybe she'd broken a bone or two, but he'd live. Cal felt the rest of the house and there were other people in there, but none of them were heading her way. Cal turned and ran into the woods.

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“They're using 3D imaging to record tombs in Egypt.” Said Tilda.

“And if we had one, we'd be using it.” Said Ellie. “We have cameras and I'm not above using a phone to take pictures if it comes to it.”

"We're hurrying.....We could get a 3D system if we waited for one to be available." Said Tilda.

"That could take months." Said Mars.

Even without Ruby setting a deadline, Ellie would never have asked the university to supply something so sophisticated. Keep it simple; always request something standard and not too expensive. That was the unwritten rule for requisitions from the university. Tilda knew that, everyone knew that. Ellie was beginning to think Tilda was simply nursing a grudge.

"Good archaeology shouldn't be hurried." Said Tilda.

"Start taking picture, Tilda." Said Ellie. "Type the records into your laptop. If you don't want to do it, I'll give the task to someone else."

"Jim would love to do it." Said Mars.

"No.....I'll do it." Said Tilda.

Projects completed went on reports to the university, with special mention for those who'd made a meaningful contribution to the project. There were rumours that such reports were instrumental in obtaining funding for post grad research projects. Probably nonsense, though Ellie didn't discourage such rumours. They were another way to keep students like Tilda, polite and well behaved.

"Get busy.....I'll be back later to look at your progress." Said Ellie.

Mars would do most of the work, without making that much fuss about it. All the students could be prima donnas, but Mars did at least get on with the job at hand. Ellie was already thinking of asking her to join her on a future dig, just over the border into Ecuador. As for getting on with it, Ellie had paperwork to do and reports to send. It was him though; there was something about the man Ruby referred to simply as Mitch.

"I'll just have a look.....Can't hurt." Ellie muttered.

A nasty man, an evil man who had planned to attack the camp. According to Ruby those plans might not be a thing of the past. Yet there was something about coming face to face with unapologetic evil. A few times now, Ellie had sat and listened to Ruby talking to Mitch. Not that she'd spoken to him, but she'd become hooked on looking and watching. Anyone else approaching the tent at the edge of the camp, would have been diverted by Sophie, or maybe Eugenie. A smiling face and they'd be told, in a very friendly way, they're weren't welcome in the tent. Ellie was welcome everywhere, even if she wasn't sure why. See anything, hear anything, ask anything.....It was actually quite scary.

"Hi Ellie, you've arrived just in time for nibbles." Said Sophie.

It was one of her tents, one she'd used as an office until the students began to arrive in their droves, sometimes before she'd got there in the morning. It made a perfect interrogation tent. Ellie hadn't used it in months.

"We have coffee and.....Spider made some flapjacks." Said Sarah.

"Yes please, one coffee and two flapjacks." Said Ellie.

Ellie knew she tended to hover, another fault her mother often noted. On this occasion she followed the food, sitting at the edge of a table to have her coffee and nibbles. Ruby was talking to Mitch and it seemed very low key for an interrogation. Ruby asked a question and Mitch would give an answer. Then Ruby would tell him what he should have said if he was being honest. It was weird, though she was beginning to suspect some of Ruby's people could get into her head, so they could probably get at Mitch's thoughts.

"Are you still planning to attack the dig site ?" Asked Eugenie.

"I'm not sure what is being planned." Said Mitch. "I haven't had contact with the Colonel for quite some time."

"True, but he suspects there will still be an attack." Said Sophie.

Ellie listened and began to understand what was going on. Ruby's team were asking questions, but had some method of knowing the true answer. So much of the strange conversation was about an attack on the dig site, which still might happen. Once she'd finished her coffee and one flapjack, Ellie put the second one in her pocket. She rose from her seat and walked over to Mitch. No asking permission, she was too angry for such niceties.

"Mitch I believe?" She asked.

"Yes, that's me."

"I believe you were planning to attack my students?"

Not an immediate answer this time, he looked at her face for a few seconds.

"Yes, I did plan an attack on Ruby's wunderkinds." Said Mitch.

She slapped him, hard across the face. No hitting her back, the large guy actually looked shocked. No one told her off, or even told her not to do it again. Spider even applauded her.

"Yay, extra points for the professor." Said Spider.

Ruby, Sophie.....Everyone in the room apart from Mitch. They all looked happy, even pleased with what she'd done. Ellie found herself wagging her finger at Mitch.

"You.....You are an evil, deplorable human being." She yelled.

Ellie left the interrogation tent and headed back to the tomb intended for the remains of Baba Yaga. Once she was sure Tilda was actually getting on with something, she'd tackle her own huge pile of neglected paperwork.

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"I made sure we always had two trained medics with us at all times." Said the Colonel. "Now you're telling me there's no one to look after the new guy?"

"Huey was with Mitch." Said Walt. "No news of Mitch, but the others are either dead or in police custody."

The Colonel looked back at Rick, who was fierce in battle and loyal. Not the sharpest knife in the drawer though and like everyone else, the deaths in weird circumstances, had rattled him.

"Wasn't Doc Travis supposed to be here by now?" Asked the Colonel.

"He had a medical emergency in Chimbote City." Said Rick. "Hopes to be here tomorrow, or maybe the day after."

In the meantime, there was a new guy with a suspected fractured collar bone and a pretty bad concussion. Colonel Arthur Moore had been there before, bought the T shirt and the DVD. If you're doing well and having easy victories, every US army veteran in the world, wants to be on your team. On the other hand, have a few deaths and hints about a ruthless adversary.....

"Can you call Doc Travis, Walt?" Asked Arthur. "Don't ask; tell him he's expected here in the very near future. Remind him what he owes me, if you think it will help."

"I'll put the fear of God into the bastard." Muttered Walt.

A house full of highly trained soldiers and yet Arthur had chosen Rick to be his runner and gofer. It had made sense at the time; Rick would have given his life for the cause. It was being of use while alive that appeared to be Rick's problem.

"New guy, Rick.....Do you know his name?" Asked Arthur.

"Ermmmm New Guy." Said Rick, while shrugging.

"No dog tags?" Asked Arthur. "Any ID in his kit bag?"

Rick shrugged and would have probably said new guy again, if Arthur hadn't been glaring at him. Rick had been in an APC hit by a Taliban IED, so Arthur tended to give him a lot of leeway. Maybe too much.

"Come on.....Let's all go and see this mystery new guy." Said Arthur. "You lead Rick; I've no idea where they put him."

"I think it's some kind of dining room, or at least it used to be." Said Walt.

Along a corridor and through a doorway and across an internal courtyard. The house had seen better days, a lot of better days. It might be neglected now, but in its heyday, it must have been a magnificent place to live. Through a set of double doors and they were into a room set up with two rows of beds. Not a barracks, the drip stands gave it away as a temporary treatment room. Arthur had spent a lot of time and money on getting the right equipment. Now it was all for nothing because fucking Doc Travis was having a bad hair day. Travis would pay one day, when it was a convenient time to dish out a little payback.....New guy had to be the one in the bed nearest to the door, as he was the only patient.

"He needs strapping up." Said Arthur. "Otherwise he'll be in pain when he wakes up....A lot of pain."

"Right." Said Rick. "How do I do that?"

Arthur slapped Rick on the shoulder; the guy's heart was in the right place.

"We've at least a dozen soldiers in the building." Said Arthur. "At least one of them will have once had a broken collar bone. They will remember what was done to them.....So they can do the same thing to the new guy."

"Got it." Said Rick. "I'll ask them all."

It was never going to be as easy as that, nothing ever was. It was a start though and with luck, the new guy wouldn't wake up into a world of pain. Arthur saw dog tags around new guy's neck. No pulling them off, another thing the movies loved to do. Arthur leant over the unconscious man.

"Colin.....Colin Reese." Said Arthur. "Tell a few people, Rick. He deserves to wake up with a few people knowing who he is.....Walt can make a call to the missing doc, while we look at the mysterious ball of blue metal."

"Johnson reckons it must be what's left of our new dumpster." Said Rick.

Back through the internal courtyard, which some of the guys had christened the cloisters. Left along a fairly grubby looking corridor and out, through a door being guarded by two of his men holding assault rifles.

"Anything to report?" Asked Arthur.

"No, been really quiet, Sir.....Just that thing. No one can lift it, even three of us trying together."

Crushed blue metal that three of his fittest and youngest soldiers couldn't budge.

"What do you think a half full dumpster weighs, Rick?" Arthur asked.

"Has to be a lot."

It did have to be a hell of a lot. Arthur was only guessing, but it couldn't be far short of six or seven thousand pounds. Scrunch that up to the size of a basketball and you ended up with something just about impossible to pick up.

"Shall I order another new dumpster?" Asked Rick.

"No, they might ask about this one." Said Arthur. "We'll go back to the old ways, digging a garbage pit. Everything will be burned and.....What won't burn will be buried in the pit, when we leave. Got all that?"

"Yes, Sir."

Arthur looked south; to where he knew Ruby's group of abominations would be doing something downright ungodly. Soon he'd attack in force and wipe them all out once and for all.

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Thiago, now known to everyone as Thio, had been curious about the tomb. He wasn't told much, though he did get invited to all the official briefing sessions and general information sharing gatherings. He'd picked it up, that the tomb would be sealed soon and hidden away until the planet was reduced to a cinder. Not his words, they'd been Spider's view of what was going to occur. Thio had a normal level of curiosity though and he couldn't be so close to so much history, without taking a look. He even had a burner phone that would take reasonable pictures of the tomb's walls. Actually, his phone was probably far better at being a camera, than it was at being a phone.

"Sorry.....I didn't mean to disturb anyone." Said Thio.

Tilda was there, taking pictures of the walls. Not that he'd have apologised to her, the woman always talked down to him. Ruby was there too, polishing a stainless steel canister. He'd seen the canister at Alessia House, he knew what it contained.

"Just keep out of my way." Said Tilda.

Ruby smiled at him and Thio smiled back.

"I'm just going to place Baba Yaga's ashes in the sarcophagus." Said Ruby. "Once I seal the lid in place, they'll be safe in there, no matter what might happen."

"So, you brought them with you." Said Thio.

"Yes, I've started carrying them everywhere, in my luggage." Said Ruby. "I never quite trusted the house, too many people there that none of us knew."

Tilda was still giving him about a level nine stink eye. Ruby was in charge now though, that was obvious.

"Can I take a few pictures?" Asked Thio.

"Official photographs only." Snapped Tilda.

"Take them, Thio.....You're not doing any harm." Said Ruby.

Tilda hurtled out of the tomb, probably gone to moan at the professor. Thio looked at Ruby, who shrugged and smiled back.

"Tilda needs to learn to be polite." Said Thio.

"I don't think she likes any of us.....Apart from Cal." Said Ruby. "Get your pictures; I won't let anyone throw you out."

Thio saw the huge picture of what someone said was Baba Yaga. He'd never met her, but looking at the picture, made him think maybe that wasn't a bad thing.

"She looks pretty scary." He muttered.

"Oh she was.....Sometimes very scary."

"I was wondering.....When you all leave and go home." He said.

"Yes?"

"Can I come with you?"

"Of course you can." Said Ruby. "I think you're now.....One of the family."

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She was in the refectory tent, nibbling at a fairly mediocre piece of cherry pie. Lily still had a bad feeling about the death of Luis, who more than likely, wasn't really called Luis. It wasn't that he was a decent guy, with two kids to support, who'd turned to crime as a way out. He was probably a total bastard who'd hurt a lot of people during his relatively short life. She didn't have a clue about his family and being honest, she didn't give a damn about them. What concerned her was the waste of effort getting him down from the ridge, only to have him die a few hours later. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, Lily believed in an orderly world, where most things made a kind of sense.

Luis dying before saying much, wasn't orderly, or fair. Even what he had told her, was in the form of a threat.

".....and the Colonel will bring the best of his fighters.....Then one night, they will attack and kill you all."

He had given them a pretty good idea of the location of the house where the cult members were gathering. He only seemed to do that as a challenge, daring them to attack the Colonel and die in the process.

".....either way, Lily.....You'll all soon be dead."

A few moments later he was dead, and she was still annoyed about it. There could be no filling in gaps in their information about who they faced, or a rough layout of the house.

"The bastard." Muttered Lily.

"Who's a bastard ?" Asked Cal.

Cal joined her without asking, carrying two large cups of coffee. She redeemed herself by pushing one of the cups towards her. The cat was with her, jumping up onto the table. It seemed to follow Cal everywhere, more like a small dog than a feline.

"Not bad coffee for the middle of nowhere.....Now, who is this bastard ?" Asked Cal.

Cal was the talk of the camp, though that might not last long. A group of post grad students with heaps of energy and varied sexual interests. Lily thought Cal would be old news before breakfast time in the morning.

"Luis.....All that work getting him here and he died." Said Lily.

"Yeah.....Fucking inconsiderate." Muttered Cal.

Cal pronounced it as fooking for some reason, which gave the word extra emphasis. For a young woman from Somalia, Cal had really adapted well to English profanity and all sorts of other bad habits. The girl had walked for miles on her own, found the Colonel's headquarters and then.....Used huge amounts of power to crush their dumpster. Yeah, that would show the bastards. Everyone who knew about it was confused, though Cal seemed to think she'd done the right thing. Ruby had already yelled at her quite a bit, so Lily was trying to remain neutral regarding the whole dumpster business.

"Is Ruby talking to you again ?" Asked Lily.

"Still a little angry." Said Cal. "No one shouted at my brother when he did it."

"Yes, I can see how that must seem unfair." Said Lily.

Cal had coming running into camp, shouting about the Colonel. That had been error number one; the students began to ask questions. Errors bred like flies after that, or at least the awareness of errors. The cult were aware that their headquarters was now a location known to Ruby, but Cal had no idea about the layout of the place. She hadn't even tried to count the number of soldiers the Colonel had to command. The worst error had been the dumpster. No ordinary human could have done that, so the cult were pre-warned and would be ready for any attack by the wunderkinds. As for Lily.....She was bemused by it all and determined to be like Switzerland.....Neutral about the whole business.

"On the plus side....." Lily began.

"Is there a plus side ?" Asked Cal.

"Crushing their dumpster to the size of a football.....You've probably scared the fook out of them."

Cal laughed and Lily laughed, though everyone else in the food tent, just looked even more confused.

"Oh, I do hope so, Lily.....I do hope so." Said Cal.

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