

Ruby 3

Chapter 1 – A Dark Place

“Aurora walked round the bed and got a good look at the girl with long dark hair. Skin with that coffee mixed with a little cream look. Expensive clothes, as though she’d been called while on a night out, somewhere that required a little black evening dress.”

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~Then~

Frank Osborne had always enjoyed taking the children from Crabtree Comprehensive on school journeys. It was something different to teaching physics and it meant two weeks in Italy with Helen Wheeler. There was one other teacher with them, but he’d developed a bit of a thing about Helen. Much to his amazement the feeling had been reciprocated. There had been two nights of passion in a tent at Lido di Roma. Wonderful, if he hadn’t been happily married for over twenty years. Helen had a husband at home too, a large man who could probably snap him in two.

“Where the hell is Vicovaro ?” He muttered.

The minibus moved well with just him in it, there was a tendency to speed up. Plus he wasn’t good at mentally converting miles per hours to kilometres per hour. Being a physics teacher he should have been, but doing it on the fly without a pen and paper....He tended to guess his speed.

“Damn those girls.” He said, while thumping the steering wheel.

Not a hard thump, Frank had never been a violent man.

“Janice I can understand..... But Pat.... Always seemed such a nice girl.”

Janice Jackson and Pat Reagan had been the bane of his life since the minibus had set foot on French soil. Both of them fifteen and awkward for the sake of it. Both obsessed with boys, they’d returned drunk from a bar in Amiens on their first night abroad. Things had become worse as time went on. Frank had to compensate a shopkeeper in Lyon to stop him pursuing a case for shoplifting with the French police.

‘Vicovaro 20.’ Said the blue road sign.

Frank felt his chest muscles relax, he wasn’t that far away from the small town. He’d gone the wrong way earlier, the numbers had begun to climb rather than decrease.

“Boys with that pair, always boys.....”

It had been a nice day, they’d been to see the Trevi Fountain as a group. The two girls had wanted to change up some pounds for Euros and that was the last he’d seen of them. Sadly not a rare event since leaving England. The local police in Vicovaro had called him. Calls from the police were mercifully still a rare event. Janice and Pat had walked into the town’s police station.

“Calm as anything he said..... Been out with some local lads and needed a lift home.”

They’d got into a car with two local men and gone off with them. Frank’s heart began to hammer in his chest as he thought about what might have happened. He wasn’t going to escape without some personal consequences, it was his duty to look after them. Humble as his career might be, it paid the bills.

“You may pick them up, but we shall be talking to their parents. Should they wish us to pursue an investigation, we will contact you.”

The police officer had told him over the phone. Probably someone senior, their English was flawless. If the parents wanted an investigation, it would probably mean the end of his career. He knew it was

his fault.... If he hadn't been so consumed with his fling with Helen Wheeler. A full investigation might well mean the end of his marriage too.

"Damn, damn, damn."

His speed was increasing again, he braked quite hard to get round the next roundabout. His head was full of noise, full of stress, full of anxiety. He took the right way to go on the roundabout, but drove on the left after leaving it.

He'd done the same thing five times in Italy and there were always the kids to shout at him, or Helen driving the second minibus, flashing her headlights at him. It was harmless, just Sir being a little eccentric. It was late though, he had the road to himself and there were no kids to shout at him.

"The head has been wanting rid of me for years."

No road signs, his foot unconsciously pressed harder on the accelerator. Frank Osborne was probably doing about eighty when he went round the gentle left hand bend in the road. The trees beside the road hid the classic Citroen car until he was too close to avoid it. The minibus hit the Citroen head on, causing most of the front end to crumple like paper. The French media reported that Frank and the driver of the Citroen had died instantly. That was an error, the driver of the Citroen lived for another three or four hours.

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Doctor Aurora Russo was coming to the end of a long shift. She should have been on her way home, but she wanted to check on the patient in intensive care. There wasn't anything to do apart from pain relief; his injuries were going to kill him. The fact that he was still alive at all was a near miracle.

"He seems to be clinging to life by willpower alone." The surgeon had told her.

A mystery man, there had been no form of reliable ID on him at the time of the accident. What did the police mean by no reliable ID? Aurora had no idea, that wasn't her problem. The police were tracing him through the car registration, but as the Citroen was registered in France that would take time. For now the mystery man in intensive care was simply known as patient B/05546. In truth he didn't need a number, everyone in the small hospital knew who she meant if she asked about 'the patient.'

"How is he doing?"

There were two nurses in the ICU, with one sat at the nurses station. For some reason the nurse sat at the desk took a few seconds to respond.

"He's still alive, though with those injuries....."

Aurora left the nurse and walked the short distance to where 'the patient' had a small area of the ICU to himself. To her surprise a woman was sat beside his bed. Visiting times could be flexible in certain circumstances, but he hadn't even been identified. No relatives had been contacted, unless....

"I'm sorry to intrude.... Did the police call you?" She asked.

No answer, she was beginning to get a bad feeling about the silent sobbing woman. The second ICU nurse seemed unconcerned though, as she emptied the catheter bag for another patient. Aurora tried the same question in her far from perfect French.

"I can tell he's dying..... I felt something." Said the woman

Awful French with a pronounced British accent. Aurora decided to try again.

"I speak English..... Did the police contact you? Sorry to ask, but given the hour.... We rarely get visitors at three thirty in the morning."

It was habit to check the clock and the actual time was three thirty three am. Aurora walked round the bed and got a good look at the girl with long dark hair. Skin with that coffee mixed with a little

cream look. Expensive clothes, as though she'd been called while on a night out, somewhere that required a little black evening dress. Only the woman's tears spoiled the look.

"His name was Serge, though his second name could change, depending on..... So many things."

"I'm sorry.....I must ask you to leave the ICU. There is a waiting area for family and friends."

Oh that smile, it made Aurora feel as though nothing could touch her, it was going to be a perfect day. Of course the woman was alright where she was, everything in the world was alright. It was as though a light had come on in the room, a wonderful bright light.

"Of course you can stay." Said Aurora. "Can I get you anything?"

"Do you think he suffered.... After the accident? No forget I asked that, of course he did."

"He's not in pain now, we've given him morphine."

"Has he long to live?"

"No, not that long at all."

"He was a hero, though you won't know that. Serge served his country in the Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure for years, the DGSE. He even received medals, though no one can see them."

"Sorry, I had no idea." Said Aurora. "The nurses all thought he had a military look about him."

"A car crash, what a pointless way for him to die." Said the woman.

"I'm Aurora by the way, Doctor Aurora Russo."

Again that smile that seemed to show her the woman's soul.

"I'm Ruby."

Aurora found another chair and sat with Ruby until Serge died. They hugged and she suddenly felt so tired. She woke up sitting on a hard wooden chair, her back felt as though she'd been there for hours. It was after ten in the morning, the nurses should have woken her. The last shift had ended, it was a different nurse on the desk. It took Aurora a few days until the nurse who had been on duty that night crossed her path again.

"No, I didn't see a woman with you.....There were no late visitors the night the mystery patient died."

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~ One Year Later ~

Ruby Anne Mason had once been told by a close friend when she was eighteen, that she'd be very dangerous by the time she was twenty five. That had been then though, before Serge had died, before she'd even known he existed. She was now twenty six and being given yet another pep talk by Charlotte. It was the sort of thing they called an intervention on late night reality TV shows.

"It's been over a year Ruby." Said Charlotte. "We all loved Serge, all of us. His training probably kept us all alive in North Korea."

"It's not that we don't care." Added Sophie.

They'd been talking over each other out of nervousness, it couldn't be easy to lecture someone you thought as your mother. Imran and Isobel were sat in the kitchen of her flat in Hackney, probably waiting for their turn to tell her to pull herself together and other pointless platitudes.

"We've been here before." Said Ruby. "I just need time, that's all. I'm still working for George, still getting showered and out by nine most days."

"George is worried about you." Said Isobel from the kitchen door.

Oh crap, that was new..... And Sophie had begun to sob. Sophie was the smallest of all the original thirteen, barely five foot tall, though she claimed five foot one. The girl's hair had always been bum length and bright red. Lately she'd been adding burgundy coloured streaks. Not really a girl of

course, though she looked like a perpetual teenager. She'd been born in the Moscow area in about eighteen eighty seven.

"George loves you Ruby." Said Charlotte. "He thinks you're holding your emotions in too tight. He's really worried."

"He thinks you've lost your..... Sparkle." Added Imran.

Oh wonderful, now Imran had joined them. Ruby was thankful Lau was somewhere in South East Asia. She could imagine his ham fisted way of trying to coax her out of herself. Did she need coaxing out ? There had been a few mornings when she had considered asking her doctor for a prescription for a few happy pills.

"My sparkle is just fine." She snapped. "It'll come back when I feel better."

"Do you need anything ?" Asked Sophie.

Twenty six and they were treating her like an elderly aunt with dementia. Something in Ruby snapped.

"I'm not an invalid for God's sake." She yelled. "I go out and earn a living.....I can take care of myself."

"We're sorry.... It's just that...." Said Charlotte.

"It's been over a year." Added Sophie

They were both crying now. Ruby wanted to get annoyed, but couldn't. There was still a nasty scar below Charlotte's left ear, from where she'd nearly died on their journey into North Korea. She patted Charlie's hand, as though she was a small child.

"Fine.... We'll start up the pizza and beer nights again, or curry and wine nights, the choice is yours. Just don't expect me to go out clubbing for a while yet." She said.

They were smiling, she'd actually managed to get the wunderkinds to smile. It had been a while since she'd done that. They weren't finished with her though.

"Spider is missing." Said Isobel.

"And Sarah isn't talking to anyone." Said Sophie. "She shouted at me when I called her about a month ago. Called you a.....Something rude and said I was one too."

"A bitch, yes I got that on my voicemail after avoiding no less than forty eight calls from her in one night." Said Ruby. "Don't worry about Sarah, her business is doing well, she won't starve."

"What do we do about Spider ?" Asked Imran.

Imran, born somewhere in India around seventeen eighty. No one was certain of the date, they weren't big on birth certificates in those days. In many ways Imran was the cleverest of all the thirteen, though they were now thirteen and a bit with Nari's child.

"Don't worry about Spider. I've known him a long time and wherever he is, you can guarantee he'll land on his feet."

"What if he's in prison somewhere ?" Asked Sophie.

"Then he'll come out with more cash than he went in with and a date with the governor's daughter. I've never known Spider to be seriously worried by any danger, even when he probably should have been."

Strangely, talking about Sarah and Spider cheered her up, brought a little sparkle back into her thoughts. Ruby reached for the strange device that seemed to be a message from a world long dead. Her piece of Karakum crap as it was affectionately known. Made of gold, it looked like a tiny version of an old fashioned navigator's sextant. The real magic appeared once it was thrown into the air.

"You haven't looked at that in ages." Said Charlotte. "You did say it was an invitation to Africa. Are we going there, to the rift valley ?"

“One day perhaps.....I just like to look at it. Close the curtains please Isobel.”

Ruby had thought the object was a brooch for quite a while. Kurt had risked his life to get it to her, so she'd always known it was important. So why had she avoided the invitation it contained for nearly three years ? It was because Patrick had died on their journey through China and Korea, one of her precious wunderkinds. Charlotte had nearly died and Ruby had a few new scars to add to her collection.

“The curtains are closed.” Said Isobel.

“Leave a gap.... We need to be able to see a little.” Said Sophie.

Isobel tutted at Sophie. Good, they were becoming their usual selves, not the strange people on their best behaviour, trying not to upset mum. Ruby threw the device onto the kitchen table. It changed, moving, restructuring itself. There was now a tiny eyepiece that shone with some kind of internal illumination. Ruby looked and it was still a view of the rift valley, but.....

“It's different..... Changed.” Said Ruby.

“A different season maybe ?” Suggested Charlotte.

“No, it's as though something happened.... Have a look.”

They each looked in the tiny eyepiece to examine the miraculous three dimensional image of Africa. Now the animals had gone and so had the grasslands. A few trees remained, but even they looked stunted. Worst of all was the brown sky that stretched from horizon to horizon.

“It's a warning.” Said Sophie. “We never accepted the invitation, so now we've been given a warning.”

“I didn't accept the invitation Sophie, it's my fault. You have to learn to criticise me again, I'm not made of glass.”

“If I tell you off, you'll say we're not a democracy.” Said Sophie.

They were all grinning at her, things were getting back to normal. Ruby took another look at the ruined landscape in the eyepiece.

“It seems we can't wait for Sarah to talk to me again, or spider to turn up from Timbuktu, or wherever he is.” She said. “I can deal with Sarah, but you can all find Spider quicker than I can. Look in his usual haunts, talk to the gangsters he seems to love hanging around with. We need to find him..... But don't do anything if he is locked up somewhere.”

“Great..... We can do that, I'll get everyone involved.” Said Charlotte.

“So we're definitely going to Africa ?” Asked Imran.

“Yes we are, just as soon as we find Spider.” Said Ruby.

“Great!!” Said Sophie.

Ruby just hoped Sophie didn't want to take a bazooka with her this time.

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~Now~

Sophie was the backup plan. She stood in the shadows, looking at her luminous watch. She was stood right up against the hospital fence and in the moon shadow of a convenient bush. As her watch showed it was just past midnight, she levitated herself into the air.

“I don't fly Spider.” She'd once told him. “I rise into the air by levitating and move myself forward, or backwards.”

“Same thing though.....Looks like you're flying.” He'd replied.

“Not the same thing at all, and I do like to be precise about such things.”

When everyone was treating her like a porcelain doll, Spider had taught her how to spit and swear. His phrase for getting her a bit grimy, getting her a bit more ready for the street. She had learned to

swear too, though she never spat. She loved Spider in the way all kids love that uncle who is always misbehaving and getting into trouble. It appeared Spider had got into some serious trouble.

“Are you in position ?” Asked Ruby.

No telepathic connection, those were unreliable and required too much concentration. Ruby had contacts who could acquire state of the art military comms hardware. The one they were using was just about impossible to track and had encryption a super computer couldn't crack.

“Over the fence and waiting.” Said Sophie.

“Place the charges and let him know.”

It was cold, Sophie did up the top button of her coat and tightened the cord on her hood. Not just to hide her face, the wind was biting. Just five degrees, cold at that time of year, even for Tallinn in Estonia. With the wind chill at a hundred or so feet from the ground, it was going to feel like setting explosive charges inside a freezer. Sophie was a great believer in layers of clothing, she was wearing two T shirts under her coat, a vest and a skiing jumper borrowed from Charlotte.

Sophie rose up the side of the hospital that wasn't just a hospital. They treated the sick, there were several floors of wards and operating theatres. There was even a high security area on the top floor for those with serious mental conditions.

“A dungeon on the top floor, that's different.” Charlotte had said.

Spider was on the top floor, Sophie had felt his presence the instant her plane had landed at Lennart Meri Tallinn Airport. Ruby's contacts had told them the hospital was also used by a criminal gang operating throughout Europe. Why Spider was currently a guest in their top floor dungeon was unknown.

“You know how good he is at annoying people.” Isobel had said.

Sophie was at the top of the building and feeling the worst of the wind chill. She looked in the window first, even though she could feel Spider in there. He was lying face down on a single bed, probably sleeping. Waking him up came after she'd placed the charges to blow out the window and a bit of the wall around it.

“A few minutes and you'll be free Rupert Bailey.” She muttered.

At one time only a few people knew Spider's real name, but the secret had stopped being a secret once they'd needed to track him down.

“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.” Ruby had said.

Sophie turned and the view was stunning. The hospital was surrounded by trees, with a large lake not far away. In the moonlight the view was beyond being merely pretty.

“Beautiful.” She muttered.

Not that there'd be any time for sightseeing. Strictly a quick in and out mission to get Spider. Even Ruby didn't know how well the gangsters might be connected and they didn't want to hang around and risk problems with the Estonian government. With luck Spider would be enjoying a fry up at home in London the following morning. Sophie began to place the charges, stripping coverings off, before pressing resin strips against the brickwork. She was always amazed the explosives didn't fall off, though she'd now done it enough times to know they wouldn't.

“Are you still on schedule ?” Ruby asked.

“Yes and the package is waiting.”

Yes, they had uncrackable encrypted comms, but Sophie found it hard to trust the system completely.

"I'm in the elevator now. I should be with the package in no more than fifteen minutes. If I'm more than twenty minutes..... You know what to do."

"Understood."

Sophie placed the rest of her charges and tried not to think about trying to rescue Spider on her own. The plan was for Ruby to enter his room, get a good strong grip on him and take him straight to her hotel room. Instantaneous travel had its risks, but Ruby was getting pretty good at it now. It was certainly better than carrying Spider like a sack of coal and taking him away in a hired car. As Sophie stuck the last charge to the wall, the circle around the window was complete. If Ruby didn't show, she just had to push the button on the detonator.

"Please be here Ruby." She muttered. "If I blow lumps out of Spider, he'll never forgive me."

Next came waking the package from his slumber, if she could. There'd soon be plenty of noise and alarms, but for now silence was the name of the game. Even on the top floor the window was barred, probably to stop their guests, willing or otherwise, from jumping through a seventh floor window. Sophie had small hands, which was useful. She could get her hand through the bars and use a glass cutter to cut a small square out of a window pane.

"Spider.....Wake up." She hissed through the hole.

Nothing, no response.

"It's cold out here..... Wake up."

Nothing again. Like all of the thirteen she had a transmit ability with her special skills. Ruby was probably best at it with Charlotte a close second behind her. Sophie was good at transmitting her thoughts and demands too, on a good day. She looked at Spider and hit him with the mental equivalent of a five am alarm call. Nothing.

"Damn, they must have given him something."

Just coming up on twelve minutes since Ruby's last message. Nothing to do but wait. Sophie flattened herself again the wall and enjoyed the view of Lake Ülemiste.

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The private hospital was owned by the gangsters, which didn't mean it wasn't used by the people of Tallinn. Ruby knew there were a lot of patients in the hospital undergoing cosmetic surgery, but not everyone was there for a face lift or a boob job. The hospital dealt with serious illnesses, there was even a psychiatric ward on the top floor. Not just a psychiatric ward, the high security area was the perfect front for a small prison, a holding facility until they decided the fate of those who'd annoyed them in some way. Even at just after midnight, the outside doors hadn't been locked. As the automatic doors opened for her, Ruby entered and walked towards the reception desk.

"Yes, can I help you ?" Asked the woman.

In uniform, but not a nurse's uniform, lots of blue and polka dots. On her own, which was a nice piece of good luck. Working her whammy, as Spider called it, was more difficult with two or more people. The trick was to get the right trigger word. Get the right trigger and people brought memories to the surface of their mind, useful memories. Ruby needed to act confused, perhaps to the point of being irritating.

"Do you speak English ? I'm sorry.....I might not even have the right hospital."

Over half of Estonians spoke English, it was a safe bet the receptionist would. She smiled at the woman who smiled back. Inwardly the woman was sighing and wishing she was somewhere else.

"My friend was brought here after a personal crisis... I think they brought her here to be evaluated. Her mind you see.... I just hope she wasn't violent."

Lots of trigger words hidden in what appeared to be random rambling. There was a patient on the top floor who had to be sedated. There were thoughts in the woman's mind, warnings she'd seen in the notes that he might be violent. Spider of course, but she already knew where he was.

"Are you tourists? We get a lot of people from England. They come for cosmetic surgery, we're much better value than your Harley Street clinics."

Ruby had thought of claiming to know a patient getting a nip and tuck, but she had to get access to the top floor without any alarms going off. They'd be going off of course, though hopefully after she had Spider safely in her hotel.

"Yes, we're tourists..... It was the drink you see, always the drink with her. They thought she was crazy..... She might be a little crazy. I'm sure they were bringing her here."

The woman's mind was so full of people brought in after a personal crisis of some kind, that Ruby was spoilt for choice. One name stood out, a Millie Freeman. About her age and brought in by the police after..... Biting off a guy's ear. Perfect.

"What is your friend's name?"

"Millie..... Millie Freeman. We've been inseparable since nursery school... Sandbox buddies are for life."

The woman flinched before looking up the name. Bite someone's ear off and you get remembered.

"We have your friend here, but she's been sedated. I doubt if you'll be permitted to see her."

The woman carried on tapping on a computer keyboard.

"As you suggested, there was some violence. You'll need to see her doctor I think.... Yes, you'll need to speak to Doctor Kass in the morning."

"Please let me see her.... Couldn't you just buzz me up to that department..... It was the drink you see, the Tequila. Did you know it's actually an hallucinogen? I read that somewhere....."

Ruby gave the woman her full blast smile. She'd quickly learned that her gift had a broadcast facility as well as being able to read minds. Ruby looked at her with her dark brown eyes, looking out from under her raven dark curls and gave her complete trust and adoration in a single smile. It worked, it always did.

"I can do that for you..... Actually if you promise to bring it back, you can have my swipe card."

"Of course I'll bring it back." Ruby lied.

The woman might be sacked, but that was preferable to the alternative. If there hadn't been the right patient to claim friendship with, or several people on reception.... She might have needed to get in by force. That could get messy..... Very messy. Ruby took the swipe card and used it on the elevator. She needed to swipe it again on the panel inside the elevator, to get access to the seventh floor.

'You have selected psychiatry.'

The voice in the lift was fairly quiet and mechanical, yet it still made her jump. It had been a while since she'd been out in the field, as Serge used to call it. She was a little rusty and out of practise. There were no armed guards to meet her on the seventh floor; she hadn't expected there would be. An empty corridor greeted her, with signs pointing left and right.

'Long Term Secure Ward.' With an arrow pointing to her left.

That was it and she felt Spider somewhere in that direction. On the way she passed several doors that looked like prison doors. Thick metal with an inspection flap that could only be opened from outside. It was irresistible.

"Ce vrei de la mine."

A middle aged man dressed in what looked like a blue boiler suit. He glared at her and shouted the words again. Not for the first time, Ruby wished she had Sarah's language skills. She simply shook her head at the man.

"Sorry, I don't understand."

"English?" He asked with a pronounced East European accent.

Ruby nodded her head, the international sign for yes. The man only said one word, but it nearly caused her to change her plans. Sophie would be able to cope with the backup plan and Lau was waiting with Eugenie in the hired SUV.

"Help."

One word, but it held so much power. Ruby shook her head.

"Sorry."

She was there for Spider and anyway.....The man might well be another gangster, as bad as those who'd locked him up. She closed the flap and carried on walking. No more opening flaps to look inside, though she was curious. Spider was behind the eighth locked metal door.

"I trust Sophie.....She'll be fine.... Better than fine."

Her right palm rested on the door, she was already applying several tons of pressure. The door was bending inwards, the frame breaking away from the wall. No, she couldn't just ignore the people in the other seven rooms. Ruby stopped using her gifts to open the door. She turned and went to the door opposite Spider's.

"Hello. I mean you no harm." She called, as she opened the flap.

A woman lying on a bed in the corner. She'd been beaten, her left eye was bruised and closed, her nose covered in congealed blood.

"Махни ме от тук." Pleaded the woman.

Damn, she was definitely going to learn a few languages, or drag Sarah everywhere with her.

"Stay where you are. I'm going to force open the door."

Good, the woman nodded at her. Ruby had yet to find anywhere in the world where people didn't understand a little English. Most seemed to learn fragments from subtitled American movies. She checked her watch and it was only eight minutes until Sophie would begin plan B.

"Stop brooding about it Ruby.....He'll be fine." She muttered. "Stay focused."

She placed her palm on the door and used so much force that it sounded as though the door had been blown out of the wall. There was even a cloud of dust from the ruined doorframe. Ruby ignored the woman on the bed; there wasn't time to get to know all of them.

She went to the next room and opened the flap. A young man, shouting at her in yet another language she didn't recognise. The woman trailing behind her did though. She yelled something at the man, which caused him to crouch near his bed and pull a blanket over his head.

"Thank you." Said Ruby.

The same routine with the door. As the door bounced off the far wall of the room, alarms began to sound.

"Damn." Said Ruby.

"Fuck." Said the girl with the battered face.

"You're right.... Fuck. Come on..... More doors to open."

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Sophie couldn't hear the noise, or feel the vibration of the doors being pushed open. She felt Ruby though, she could see her in her mind, moving the wrong way. She looked at her watch and it was fifteen minutes past midnight, the time when Spider was supposed to be safely at the hotel.

“Oh, please Ruby..... Don't make me use the backup plan.” She muttered.

The plan was simple. Blow the window out, swoop in, grab Spider and swoop out again. Carry him down the wall, over the fence and get him to the SUV. He was Lau and Eugenie's problem then. It all sounded so simple, so easy. She had the strength to carry Spider, but his body was large and awkward to carry. He might well wake up and struggle. Supposing she dropped him ?

“No.... No, no..... Everything will be alright.”

The urge to constantly check her watch grew. The seconds began to take forever to pass until it was close to the agreed time to put plan B into operation and then they sped by. The alarms began just as she was checking on whether Spider was still asleep.

“Let's rescue Spider..... It'll be a nice easy warm up job.” She muttered.

No need for silence now, she shouted through the hole in the window and gave Spider another mental full volume alarm call. Nothing, he didn't even move and it was now a minute past the agreed time for the backup plan.

“Please let this work.” She prayed to no particular deity.

Sophie moved up and away from the window, before pressing the detonator. The explosion was impressive, lots of red hot gasses and flying bricks. She just hoped that Spider hadn't been hit by the debris. Shaped charges worked well, though they were far from perfect. Time to swoop in.

“Oh, Shit ! Please be alright Spider.”

Sophie never realised how tiring levitating was, until she stopped doing it. As she stood in front of Spider's rubble covered bed, she felt fatigued, stressed and a little scared. Spider was family, he couldn't be dead. But they'd all thought that about Serge. She pulled rubble off the bed, throwing it through the hole where the outside wall had once been.

“Sophie..... What are you doing here ?”

He was awake, at last. A cut nose and probably a few bruises, but otherwise Spider looked as good as new. She brushed the dust off his face and kissed his cheek. A huge hug with the kiss had probably been a mistake.

“Owww, that hurts..... I love you Sophie..... Just stop squeezing me.”

More alarms started up as Spider sat on the bed and looked around the room. His eyes ended up looking through the hole in the wall. It was cold outside, probably well below freezing with the wind chill. Spider was shivering.

“What did you do Sophie ?”

She was learning..... The best way to get past a question you didn't particularly want to answer, was to ignore it. Ruby did it all the time.

“I need to carry you, there's a car waiting.” She said. “Don't struggle, it's a long way down.”

“I take it we can't use the elevator ?”

“No, I have no idea what's going on out there, but it sounds and feels like something bad. The plan was for us to swoop down to the car.....It was Ruby's plan.”

“Fine, we'll swoop.” Said Spider.

Sophie grabbed him and put him over her shoulder. Not a dignified way for him to travel, but it was the safest way to carry him.

“Oh..... I can't breathe properly Sophie.”

“Do you want to stay here ?”

“No.”

Sophie walked straight through the hole in the wall and out of the hospital. She let herself drop fairly fast, there had been time for armed guards to get into position. No one fired at them as she fell for

four floors and decelerated quickly before landing at the foot of the wall. Spider was coughing and making choking sounds.

"Are you alright Spider ?" She asked.

"I've been better.....Gentle this time Sophie, I'm not getting any younger."

"You're still nearly a hundred years younger than me..... Ninety three years to be precise."

She liked to be precise about such things. Sophie did take it gently, as she carried Spider over the fence and the two miles to where the SUV was parked.

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One of the rooms had four people in it and another five. Ruby ended up with a small crowd of released prisoners, all speaking languages she didn't understand. The good thing was that although some had injuries, they could all walk. The alarms weren't helping, everything had to be said by shouting.

"Quiet..... Please." She yelled.

No good, they were all talking and yelling at the same time. Thankfully they all viewed each other as their enemy's enemy. None of them were fighting one another. Ruby used her gift on broadcast mode, at very low power.

"Shut up." She shouted.

Once she had silence, it gave her a good opportunity to look over the group of people who she considered to be under her protection until they were safely out of the hospital. The man from the first room she'd looked in appeared to be a little twitchy. Was he a genuine patient ? It crossed her mind that she might be freeing at least one genuinely dangerous mental patient. No time to worry about that, twitchy or not she was going to get him out of there.

"Who speaks good English ?" She asked. "Not some English, but really good English."

Quite a bit of looking at each other and some muttering. It appeared the woman with the battered face was the best English speaker. First rule.... Get a name so that you can yell out if things looked dangerous.

"What's your name ?" Asked Ruby.

"Anna."

Great, something easy to remember and pronounce. They might all survive the armed men entering the building after all. Ruby's senses weren't brilliant in places like the hospital, with several hundred people on many different floors. She could see the three armed men though, their emotions lit them up like beacons. Excitement mixed with fear and a love of violence. They were hoping to inflict pain and suffering, actually looking forward to it.

"There are too many of us to use the elevator Anna. Do you understand ?"

"Yes.... I taught English..... At home in Varna."

A Bulgarian woman a long way from home. It was a pity there wasn't time to share a few stories about Varna.

"There are men coming, armed men." Said Ruby. "I have a card to open the door to the stairs. When they get in the elevator, we'll use the stairs. We need to be quick then, tell them that..... Make sure they understand."

Ruby walked, while they all followed and Anna yelled at them in several different languages. It felt like chaos, but they were all silent when Ruby used the swipe card on the door. She waited, feeling the intensity of rage build in the men, as they talked to the woman on the reception desk.

"Get ready." Said Ruby.

Again Anna repeated her words in several languages. Anna was growing on her. The nagging idea that she might be releasing one or more dangerous crazies, refused to leave Ruby's mind.

"Why did they lock you up?" She asked Anna.

"A difference of opinion."

Great, a Spider sort of answer. Asking had triggered memories though and Ruby saw Anna arguing with several people and one of them had knocked her out. The difference of opinion had been over some missing merchandise, probably drugs. It was illogical, but Ruby viewed Spider's drug dealing as an aberration, something easily forgiven. Yet she viewed it as despicable when others did it.

"Now." She yelled.

No need for translation, as she ran down the stairs, the others followed. The twitchy man stumbled, so Ruby supported him. The elevator would get to the seventh floor before they were outside the building. The armed men would need to look around though and then there was the return journey in the elevator. Ruby was confident that her mixed bag of escapees would survive to see another day. Someone stumbled.

"Help them.... Help each other." Shouted Anna.

Yes, definitely growing on her, plus Spider would like her. No..... Ruby already had the thirteen to look after and then there was Spider and Sarah. No more picking up injured birds, hoping their wings would heal.

"No..... Stop..... You're not authorised to leave."

The woman on the reception desk stopped shouting and began to scream. It looked as though fear had cancelled out Ruby putting the whammy on her.

"Ignore her..... Outside.... Leave here now." Shouted Ruby.

The button to open the doors did nothing. Lifting her hand and using it as a focus helped. Ruby aimed her left palm at the doors and allowed a little anger to become something she still didn't fully understand. The doors became shards of shattered glass, blasted out into the woods.

"Go..... Run.... Before the men come down." She shouted.

No one needed much persuasion, though twitchy guy didn't seem to know where they were. He looked genuinely surprised when Anna told him they were in Tallinn. Ruby watched him run off into the night.

"I really hope he's not a dangerous crazy." She said.

"No, he ran a casino, before the takings kept dropping.....He was marked for execution, we all knew it."

Ruby had underestimated the woman on the desk, she must have called the armed men. They were in the elevator and on the way down.

"Go.....Run." She told Anna. "I'll deal with them."

"I'll help, do you have a gun?"

"No guns, this is a hospital. I can take care of them."

As the elevator doors opened, the men came out with their guns raised. The first out fired twice, though his bullets never reached Ruby. Once her gift had damaged the life around her, withering plants and killing insects. Now she could draw vast amounts of power from a vast area. The effect of the flora and fauna of the woods was negligible. The power she drew into herself was huge though and she did it almost instantly. Again she raised her left arm, pointing her palm towards the elevator.

"What are you going....."

Anna was in the middle of saying, though the question was never asked. Ruby's power pushed the bullets back and the men. Two large plants in pots were picked up too, unintended victims of the

primal power Ruby was unleashing. She'd once used fire, it was easy to control. Now she used forces that crushed, squeezed, hammered and destroyed. The men were probably dead when they hit the back wall of the elevator. Ruby folded the metal walls of the elevator over them, pushing, crushing, squeezing. It was all over very quickly.

"What are you ?" Yelled the woman at the desk.

Ruby left with Anna following her. It seemed she was still saving wounded birds after all. As Ruby walked she dug her comms device out of a pocket in her jacket. Sophie answered almost immediately.

"He's safe Ruby..... I did it."

"Well done Sophie, I knew I could rely on you. Is he awake ?"

"Yes."

"Did he say why they locked him up ?"

"He says it was a difference of opinion."

"Silly, he knows I can easily drag the right answer out of him." Said Ruby.

"I know, he is very stupid. Makes you wonder why we bothered saving him."

Ruby could hear Spider shouting at Sophie, while Lau laughed at them both.

"Everything alright ?" Asked Anna.

"Yes, everything seems to be getting back to normal."

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