

Ruby V : Machu Picchu

Chapter 25 - Devastation

“Am I allowed to hope for a miracle ?”

“Yes, of course you are.” Said Sophie.

No adding that it was pointless, or that she had to accept that Rupert Bailey, AKA Spider, was gone forever. Sarah didn't need to hear that and to be honest.....Sophie too, was still hoping for a miracle.”

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Caleb woke up covered in dirt and rubble. The right side of his head hurt and touching where it hurt, left his fingers feeling sticky. Blood of course, he'd been in enough fights to know what the stickiness meant. Unlikely he'd been hurt that badly, or he wouldn't be alive to worry about it. He had the feeling that he hadn't been unconscious for long.

“Oh crap, Gabi was right on top of the explosion.” Yelled Cal.

His hearing was still a little fuzzy from the explosion, but he'd heard Cal. Standing up was the first test and Caleb managed that. No pains, though his left foot had collided with something. More a throb than pain, though he'd be limping for a while. Both arms and hands worked, so he decided things could have been a lot worse. He saw Cal pulling a tarpaulin over what was left of Gabi and knew things could have been a hell of a lot worse. His legs felt wobbly, so he leant on the side of the mining machine's trailer. Judging by the damage, the trailer must have had a worse time of it than him. Sophie was there, hugging him, before giving him an intense look.

“What are you doing ?” He asked. “That hurts, a lot.”

It was as if she was using a bright light to look into his mind.

“You've a concussion, I'm looking for damage.....Who am I ?”

“You're Sophie, my pain in the arse girlfriend.” He said.

“How many fingers am I holding up ?”

“You're not showing me any fingers.” He muttered.

“I suppose you'll do.....For now.” Said Sophie. “Sit on the trailer until the world stops spinning about. I suspect you'll be needed when we load up the trucks and head out of Vista Alegre.”

As Sophie went to move away, he grabbed her wrist.

“I saw poor Gabi.....Is everyone else alright ?” He asked.

“No one can find Spider.”

Caleb let the world drift by for a few minutes, as he watched dust covered people rush about.

Everyone and everything was covered in it, the yellowish brown dust of the Nazca desert. The dust even seemed to fill the air he was breathing. He watched as Ruby yelled at Lily, telling her to call in a missile strike on the still smoking hole in the ground.

“.....Anything might be waiting to come up out of the shaft.” Shouted Ruby.

Sarah began shouting at Ruby about there being a chance Spider was still down there, injured but still alive. Lily became involved for a while, and Caleb was glad he wasn't part of it all. The missiles were cancelled, though there was another argument about the best way to seal the shaft they'd spent so long digging. Caleb sort of napped, while still sitting upright. He came out of it with a headache, but the fuzzy hearing had cleared.

".....We've all been sensing for him, Sarah." Said Ruby. "There are no life signs down there.....None at all."

Ruby, Cal and Sophie were all stood around the smoking shaft, staring down into it. Sarah was crouched beside the hole, yelling for Spider. Now he had a chance to look at her properly, Sarah was holding her left arm against her side. He began to notice everyone had a splash of blood somewhere on their dusty clothing. Caleb knew he was feeling better, when he began to feel useless. He needed to help.

"The mining machine needs dropping down the hole." Said Cal.

He helped as best he could and it had to be something to do with getting his blood pumping. A few minutes of tugging at buckled machinery and he felt a lot better. Cal did most of the heavy lifting, but Caleb felt he was contributing. While everyone else was packing up and getting ready to leave, the mining machine dropped into the hole it had created.

"The trailer next." Said Cal.

"It won't move, the tyres are shredded." Said Caleb.

"I'll push.....You can shout out left or right." Said Cal.

Even with Cal and her wunderkind strength, it still took a while. It was noisy as the trailer hit the top of the mining machine. When he'd been at school, a dinner lady had dropped an entire tray of stainless steel cutlery. It sounded like that, but a thousand times louder.

"Just the rails and we're finished." Said Cal.

Caleb wasn't completely mended and it might be a while before he was. It was a relief when Ruby and Sophie helped to lift the rails that had held the mining machine. Each of them made the loud metal against metal sound, as they hit the bottom of the shaft.

"All this noise, but no angry locals complaining." Said Thio.

"The fence held.....They'll all be waiting outside, or gone home." Said Sophie. "My guess is that they've all run away."

"There's no crowd out there, I'd sense it if there was." Added Ruby.

There was still work to do with the shaft, which was still smoking slightly. Luckily it needed the three gifted people to carry it out. They circled the hole and each moved their hands around in slightly different ways. The hole collapsed in on itself, leaving an area of rough, disturbed ground.

"The cops will never dig it all up, I'd bet a year's salary on it." Said Todd.

Todd had been to drive the bus back and he confirmed there was no one outside the now open gates, not a solitary complaining member of the Vista Alegre public. Like everyone else, Todd had red stains on his clothing from several small wounds. The last task was probably the least pleasant. Caleb had been wondering about it and she hadn't gone into the hole.

"What do we do with Gabi?" Asked Cal.

There was a tarpaulin cover near the fence, with a bulge under it that was the body of Gabriela, who liked to be called Gabi. None of them had really known the owner of the fence company for long, but she'd become one of the gang.

"At the moment it was just an unexplained explosion." Said Todd. "If the cops find Gabi, it may become a full blown murder investigation."

"We knew her, she can't be sent to Limbo." Said Sarah. "Not like the cult members, she was one of us."

"I tend to agree with Sarah." Added Lily.

"Whatever we do needs to be quick." Said Sophie. "I can hear sirens.....Still a long way off, but I'm sure we can all guess where they'll be heading."

A group of grubby people, all of whom had wounds of varying degrees of seriousness. Caleb was still feeling a little woozy from being knocked unconscious. He was pleased that despite everything, no one wanted to simply dispose of Gabi's body.

"Wrap the tarpaulin tighter." Said Ruby. "We'll put her in the bus and take her with us."

"No, we can't dump her..... It's not right." Said Cal.

"No dumping her.....We'll leave her outside her own home." Said Ruby. "Someone will notice the body, but not until we're well on the way to Lima."

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They were waiting at a long term commercial vehicle parking area in Lima. Quite some way from Alessia House, Lily was driving the bus across town to pick them up. Everyone had made their own way back from Vista Alegre, so Eugenie hadn't seen any of the others.....Since. She remembered seeing the explosion as seen by the high definition cameras on the drone. A bright flash and then so much smoke. She really had thought everyone down there was dead. There had been phone calls on the way back, everyone wanting more details. Gabi had died, Spider was gone and Eugenie didn't have any more details. A huge bang, smoke and then Lily was telling her to use the emergency plan and go home to Lima. Home, everyone now seemed to think of Alessia House as home.

"I feel tired; Lol.....So I know you must be tired." Said Eugenie. "We need to look over the truck, just one last time. Nothing personal can be left behind."

"Yeah, on my way. I need to get our bags, so I'll go through where we slept." Said Lol.

The sign saying they were working for the power company had gone, dumped on a pile of junk somewhere out in the Nazca desert. The trailer with its drones had gone too, part of the emergency plan. A simple phone call to a number Snowy had given them. A call asking if mum was alright had set it in motion. At their last overnight stop, two men they didn't know, has arrived in a large truck. They'd left with the trailer being towed behind their truck. Eugenie knew she'd miss the drones for quite some time.

She checked over the rear of the truck and decided that anything incriminating had been removed. Ruby had arranged for a man called Daniel to deal with the truck. Deal with probably meant taking it away and crushing into metal cubes, which was a shame. As with the drones, Eugenie had formed an attachment to the large truck. She sat on the grubby ground, her back against one of the truck's wheels. Lol soon joined her.

"Found a toothbrush." Muttered Lol. "Might not be ours, but I packed it anyway.....How long until Lily arrives?"

"Depends on the traffic.....Probably twenty minutes, or so."

"Do you think Ruby will get the bus crushed?" Asked Lol.

"No, everyone loves that old bus."

"Who do you think set the trap for us?" Asked Lol.

"We've made a lot of enemies." Said Eugenie. "My guess would be that Guardian Ishel set it up, the Female leader of the rogues. She died in the same battle where Kallina died. There's no point looking for revenge on those already dead."

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Sophie had less affection for vehicles than Eugenie, but she hoped the truck she'd driven, was headed towards a new owner, rather than the crushers. Probably a forlorn hope of course. With the trucks destroyed, there were two less things to link them with the huge explosion in Vista Alegre. There was that picture of Ruby shaking hands with the town mayor. Even Ruby seemed worried about that and she was rarely rattled by anything.

The motor home had gone back to whoever it had been hired from and Sophie was looking out of the window at their only remaining transport. There it was parked outside Alessia House, their old but reliable bus. Sophie felt Sarah arrive in her mind, before she began pulling at her arm. Everyone could feel the pain coming off Sarah, even if they weren't a wunderkind. Sarah refused to give up on Spider, which was crazy, but understandable. If Caleb had gone that day, she'd have been the same. "Can we talk?" Asked Sarah.

"Yes, of course."

"Outside.....Can we go for a walk?" Asked Sarah.

"Well.....I do need a couple of things from the supermarket."

Sarah didn't say anything for two blocks and it was about four blocks to the supermarket. Sophie knew what Sarah was going to ask, she'd been doing a broken record on it since they'd been back in Lima. She wanted to go back to the Nazca desert and look for Spider. She'd have been advocating digging in the collapsed shaft, if the place wasn't likely to be crawling with local law enforcement. Sarah held Sophie's hand before saying it.

"Sophie....."

"No, Sarah.....We can't go back to Vista Alegre." Said Sophie. "By the time all the fuss had died down, they're likely to be building new houses where we dug the shaft."

"Don't look into my mind, it's creepy." Muttered Sarah.

"I didn't, I don't need to." Said Sophie. "You've asked me before and tried everyone else. No one will go back there.....The cops are treating Gabi's death as murder."

"But.....Spider might not be dead." Shouted Sarah.

Just one other person within hearing range, an old man walking a tiny dog. Sophie stopped and hugged Sarah and much to her relief, Sarah hugged her back. There had been a lot of grief among the wunderkinds and their human friends. Kallina had died and Olga's brother, Alex. He hadn't been one of them, not really. Max had though and Anna and both of them had died quite recently. Add on the death of a wunderkind, Delmar and it was no wonder that Sophie felt like an expert on dealing with bereavement. Number one rule; never tell anyone to calm down. Number two rule; never go anywhere near the whole positive thinking nonsense. People needed to get all the pain out. Sarah might not get over the death of Spider, if she wasn't allowed her daft schemes and occasional angry outburst.

"I looked into that hole, as did Ruby." Said Sophie. "Cal was there too and we all knew Spider very well. If his living essence had been anywhere within several miles, we'd have felt him. He's dead Sarah and going back to Vista Alegre won't change that."

"You're sure?"

"Yes.....Unless there's some kind of miracle." Said Sophie.

"Am I allowed to hope for a miracle?"

"Yes, of course you are." Said Sophie.

No adding that it was pointless, or that she had to accept that Rupert Bailey, AKA Spider, was gone forever. Sarah didn't need to hear that and to be honest.....Sophie too, was still hoping for a miracle. "Come on.....Or they'll have sold all the best pastries." Said Sophie.

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Ruby had lost one of her best friends, yet everyone was looking to her for support and sympathy. That was right of course, she was their leader. It wasn't helping her though and her need to grieve for Spider. He'd been there with her, as she'd made her first trip to Eastern Europe. Sarah had been

there too, though she and Spider hadn't even been that friendly with each other, not then. Just the three of them, on their way via the Eurostar to Paris.....

"We could give Alessia House back early and go home." Said Todd. "Would that help?"

Back early to confront Charlotte and kill her, or be killed. It wasn't an appealing prospect and she had no intention of reminding Todd about her agreement with Charlie.

"I want to finish our vacation." She said. "How about.....You and I stay in Lima until we go home?"

We can do all the tourist sites, some of them twice. A genuine vacation...Does that sound good?"

"What about the others?" Asked Todd. "Are you going to ask them to stay?"

Would she? It seemed a bit mean to demand that they all remained with her. She knew Eugenie and Lorenzo were keen to go home.

"They can stay or go as they please." She said. "Though I'm sure Sophie and some of the others will stay until we go back to London."

"Great.....We'll finally get a genuine holiday." Said Todd.

Unless the police arrived of course, though every passing day made that less likely. Gabi's death was being treated as a street crime that had ended badly, according to Spider's contacts at DINI. Her contacts now of course, though talking to them had opened a few emotional wounds. The police anywhere were part of the great mindless bureaucracy of any nation. It shouldn't have surprised her that no one seemed to be linking her.....The woman pictured shaking hands with the mayor; to the explosion in Vista Alegre. It had happened in the arse end of town after all. Ruby wasn't a huge believer in luck, but she was hoping that the police would never be there, at Alessia House and asking about events out in the Nazca desert. As to who had set the trap? Someone probably trying to kill Kallina and in her very long life, she had to have made a lot of enemies. Ruby accepted that she might never know who'd been responsible for killing Spider and Gabi.

'Ruby.....Outside, I'm outside.'

For some reason, thoughts sent directly into the mind, have a slightly different perceived sound to if they were stood in front of you. It was Charlotte; Ruby would have known her mental voice anywhere. Come to gloat.....Though she had been friends with Spider. Giving Charlie the benefit of the doubt, Ruby decided to talk to her.

'Do you know the supermarket we use?'

'Of course I do.' Sent Charlie.

'I'll be there in fifteen.....Make that twenty minutes.'

'Fine.'

Ruby looked out of the window and there was the bus and two passing kids, but no Charlie. She was good at hiding though and might well have been behind a parked car, or even a bush in someone's garden. One thing was certain; her self-appointed nemesis would be waiting at the Tottus supermarket in twenty minutes.

"I'm going to the shops.....Do you want anything?" She asked Todd.

"I hate to say it, but I'd love some of those coconut macarons they sell."

"Then you shall have them." Said Ruby. "While I'm gone, turn our war room back into a holiday planning room.....Oh, and get out all the tourist brochures."

"I have a feeling; our belated vacation will be fun." Said Todd.

Ruby hoped that too. If there was such a thing as karmic balance, they were both owed a break. Four blocks to the supermarket, time to make sure none of the wunderkinds were following her. Sophie was the one for things like that, acting as her self-appointed guard. Spider was dominating emotions though and Ruby was totally alone.

"Ahhh....There you are." Ruby muttered.

Charlie was in the Tottus supermarket, probably the fruit and veg aisles. No attempting to hide, she was like a bright yellow light on a dark and cloudy day. Had it come, the challenge to fight until only one of them was left alive ? London had been agreed, but Charlie might have decided that was too long to wait. Ruby crossed the road and entered the supermarket, picking up a basket on her way. 'I'm here.'

'I see you.' From Charlie.

Supermarkets were great for clandestine meetings. The constant background music and people yelling at their kids, with the kids yelling back. Keep moving up and down the aisles and no one can hear your conversation, or even care if they could. Charlotte found Ruby, at the shelves full of cakes and delicious looking nibbles.

"Todd has fallen in love.....With their macarons." Said Ruby.

"What's the difference between a macaroon and a macaron ?" Asked Charlie.

"I believe it's just one letter o." Said Ruby.

Ruby put a pack of macarons in her basket and then wandered around the store, finding a few more items to put in her basket. All the time, Charlie followed her, making small talk. Ruby had an idea what was on Charlie's mind, before she said it.

"I know we agreed on London, but we're both here now." Said Charlie. "Only if you agree of course, I will honour our agreement. But.....We could sort the matter out, right now."

"You haven't bought anything." Said Ruby, looking at Charlie's empty basket.

The comment wasn't intended to confuse Charlie, but it seemed to.

"I erm.....Don't need anything." Said Charlie.

"As the challenged, I would expect the choice of where it happens." Said Ruby.

"Yes.....No problem. Where did you have in mind ?"

Ruby seemed to have the conversation in her mind, as though it was all Déjà vu. She felt locked into a set of circumstances and knew Charlie would agree. The only uncertainty was which of them would survive.

"It has many names in several ancient languages." Said Ruby. "Thanks to Cal, everyone at Alessia House refers to it as Limbo. I'm sure you know where I mean ?"

"I do and it's a very good choice." Said Charlie. "Plenty of space and no chance of bystanders getting involved."

"I need to pay for these things." Said Ruby.

Again, Charlie looked thrown by the comment. To Ruby it felt as though Charlie was nervous, now the moment was getting closer. For her own part, Ruby would miss Todd and her friends, but she'd been so close to death, so many times.....She'd outstared the dragon, the terror of death.

"We need an understanding." Said Ruby. "We're going to Limbo and only one of us can return. No running back to this world, to try again another day. Only one of us can survive....Agreed ?"

Ruby wouldn't have called it fear, but her words had thrown Charlie, again. It was the one difference between them that might give Ruby an edge. That and the gift the Fire God had left inside her.

"I've no intention of running anywhere, Ruby." Said Charlie. "I agree, only one of us can return from Limbo."

"Good, good.....Then it's agreed." Said Ruby.

Ruby paid for the macarons and a few other items, mainly things Todd liked. It felt strange to be taking a green Tottus bag to Limbo, but hopefully.....She'd be bringing it back again.

"There's an alley at the back of the store, we can go from there." Said Ruby.

The alley with the smelly dumpsters, where Sophie had been attacked by a local street gang. That had only been a few months ago, but it felt like a lifetime. So much had happened and now she was preparing to end Charlie's life. They stood facing each other, like old time cowboy gunslingers.

"It.....None of this is personal." Said Charlie.

"Just shut up and go to Limbo." Said Ruby. "If you were expecting a final hug.....I'm not in the mood."

Charlie glared at her, while Ruby looked at Charlie and felt sad. She'd been second mother to all the wunderkinds and one of them had turned bad. Was it her fault ? Had she missed lots of red flags, because she didn't want to see them ? Cal had a darkness about her, but Ruby had managed to help her grow her powers and aim them in the right direction.

"Where did I fail with you ?" Muttered Ruby.

"Bitch." Snapped Charlie.

Charlie glared once more and was gone, no doubt finding the perfect place on Limbo for a surprise attack. She'd probably be growing the monster inside her, the creature of flames and burning. Ruby counted slowly to twenty and used the witchcraft spell to enter Limbo.

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When Ruby wanted to hide her presence, she was very, very good at it. The first thing she did after arriving in Limbo, was to hide herself under layers of magical wards and spells. Her favourite was an adaptation of what Sophie called the 'don't you worry about me,' gift. Yes, Sophie really had once walked half the length of a passenger jet, while naked. No one had seen her....Actually they had seen her, but their brains hadn't acknowledged her presence. Ruby used the gift to the max, giving herself the kind of hidden presence, the people who make stealth bombers would have wet dreams about. Would it keep her hidden from Charlotte ? Yes, it had for a while in Cusco. Ruby had dialled her stealth down a little to make Charlie believe she couldn't completely hide from her.

"Oh, how I hate this place." Muttered Ruby.

There were landmarks, though most of them were dumped objects from various worlds. Baba Yaga had known of a corroded B52 bomber, complete with the skeletal remains of the crew. It looked to have crash landed in a shallow valley, though no one knew how it had ended up in Limbo. Ruby hadn't been that often, but she did have a favourite place. Once thoroughly stealthed, she moved herself instantly to what she thought of as the super yacht. She arrived on the rear deck of what had probably been the most treasured possession of a billionaire.

"Home away from home." She muttered. "Or at least battered wreck away from home."

Ruby had never looked the vessel up in any official records. It was in Limbo now, its story was over. Digging and delving for information wasn't really her thing and the ship didn't matter now, it would never leave Limbo. The Frisky Nymph out of Nassau in the Bahamas, it looked the kind of ship the corporate super rich were buying in the late seventies. The once luxurious vessel had been dropped into Limbo, literally dropped. The buckling of the hull and superstructure hinted at a drop for a couple of hundred feet, onto hard, dry ground. One day, when she had time, she might dig around a little into the history of the Frisky Nymph out of Nassau.

"Alright girl, you're not here as a tourist." She muttered at herself.

Nothing was ever a hundred percent, but Ruby was ninety nine point nine-nine, sure she was hidden from Charlie. That would never do, Limbo was a huge place with, as far as she could tell, no visible horizon. There had to be a tiny bit of visibility, to bring Charlotte to her. Ruby didn't take herself straight there; she enjoyed using the stairs and walking around the once elegant ship.

"Oh, Olga.....Your past sins are actually proving useful." Ruby mumbled.

Down below decks, in what had once been a gymnasium. In a cabinet and away from any carrion feeders that might be looking for a meal, was a body. A body that had been there long enough to be quite decayed, but still a little bit gooey. Olga had killed the man in a fit of rage, after he'd killed someone who meant a lot to her. Fine, the Hungarian police rarely even questioned an organised crime boss of her standing. The man had connections though, in the Russian ruling oligarchy. He'd been the son of someone famous for disappearing their enemies. So.....Dimitri had officially vanished without trace and Ruby had brought his body to Limbo. There was an unpleasant smell, as she opened the cabinet.

"Sorry Dimitri, you don't deserve this indignity."

She'd straighten him up before leaving, if she survived. Ruby decided that if she won and was not too badly injured. She'd come back and bury the Russian man properly. She pulled the body out and onto the floor. Even tendons and sinews had decayed; the body was in three separate parts, by the time it was lying on the floor. He'd once been wearing an expensive suit, which was now a rag, soaked in his body's putrescence.

"Leg bone.....Arm bone, or skull ?" She asked herself.

It didn't matter, not really. Ruby needed some of her un-stealthed bodily fluid, saliva was perfect. She spat on Dimitri's left femur, his long leg bone. A little smoothing and spreading by hand and Charlie would be able to spot her DNA for many miles. Why it was on a long dead corpse ? Hopefully that little puzzle would keep Charlie there for a while.

"Time to hide." She mumbled.

Two words and one hand gesture and she was on a hillside overlooking the Frisky Nymph. In her own world, instantaneous travel could be unreliable. For some perverse reason, she found it easier in Limbo. Ruby refreshed some of the hiding spells and clawed her way into a thick bush. The supermarket bag with Todd's macarons was dropped at her feet. With luck she'd recover it later. Once she'd dug in far enough to see the wrecked ship through the twigs and leaves, she crouched inside the bush and waited.

"Come on Charlotte, don't disappoint me." She muttered.

Limbo was a large place, though she had no real idea about how large it really was. Five times the area of the land mass of the Earth, ten times, a hundred times ? Ruby didn't like guessing, but it had to be at least ten times the size. All that empty space and the needle in the haystack was a little of her smeared saliva.

"Oh, Charlie.....Now I am impressed." She muttered, at little more than a whisper.

An hour it had taken, for Charlie to turn up on the top deck of the Frisky Nymph. It seemed everyone liked walking around super yachts, even wrecked ones. Charlie did a quick look around, before heading down the stairs. Ruby gave her a minute or two, to get below decks and find what was left of Dimitri. Inside Ruby was a tiny spark of a very ancient God. Whether it was hers forever, or a single use gift ? She had no idea, but she began to let that tiny spark, change her. No physical changes, she'd never be anything like Charlie's creature of flames and burning. Hopefully though, the changes would surprise her dangerous nemesis.

"Here I come.....Ready or not." Muttered Ruby.

Her stealth spells must have been good. Charlie didn't appear to notice Ruby as she arrived in the ship's wrecked gymnasium. For some reason only Charlie would know, she was pulling Dimitri's remains apart with her bare hands. Ruby had to ask.

"What are you doing ?"

Charlotte looked at her and she wasn't yet the creature of flames, but she was beginning to change. Both her hands were covered in orange flames, as she turned towards Ruby.

"I'll make this quick." Screeched Charlie.

She ran at Ruby, striking her hard in the face with a flaming right hand. Ruby felt the heat, though her skin didn't burn. She felt the staggering force of the blow, yet she wasn't pushed back. It was her turn now. Ruby hit Charlotte across her face, with a backhand blow. The effect was far more than expected. Charlie was sent crashing into the row of cabinets and.....Surprisingly, she was bleeding from a cut on her face.

"Tricks, Ruby.....More tricks.....This will be over very quickly." Yelled Charlotte.

As Charlotte hurtled across the room, Ruby stood there and didn't move. Holding her ground appeared to be working well and if Ruby had learned anything about battle tactics, it was not to abandon something that worked. Charlie grabbed her by the shoulders and put her face only a couple of inches away from hers. It was now its face, the dreadful creature of flames. That creature had so often seemed to be a on their side, a good thing. Ruby had always had her doubts and now she saw it for what it was.....A thing of pain and evil. Charlotte was still there, but mostly it was now a monster grabbing Ruby.

"You can't win." Shouted Ruby. "Not this time."

No more words from It, the monster. Flames poured out of it, covering Ruby from head to foot. Hot burning flames that passed around her, without even scorching her clothing. Ruby felt desperation coming from the creature that now seemed incapable of hiding its thoughts. The flames became hotter, filling the room and igniting anything and everything combustible. Ruby felt surrounded by fire and felt the flames, though there was no pain. Poor Dimitri would never get a proper burial, cremation would have to do. Ruby decided holding her ground had done all it could for her. She hit the Charlie-It creature hard in the face and felt something break.

"My turn now." Ruby yelled.

It was incredibly hot in the gymnasium. Things not usually combustible were burning, a few were exploding. The noise was deafening and Ruby felt the creature of flames had created a little piece of hell for itself.

When she'd spent the best part of two days with Qalalu Karwancho, The God of Fire; she'd picked up an idea, an inkling of events before any living thing walked or crawled over a newly formed planet Earth. Not easy with no common language, but imagery pushed into her mind had worked quite well. Ruby knew about absolute zero, every kid at secondary school can grasp the idea. A cold that is total, no energy left at all. Some say it's unachievable, but the concept is accepted.

Qalalu Karwancho had shown her absolute maximum, a state where as much energy as possible, had been pushed into a specific location. So much energy that no more could be applied. An infant planet Earth had once known absolute maximum at one tiny location, for less than a nanosecond. The effect had been.....Momentous. Ruby couldn't hope for that kind of power, but she'd try to get close. She held the monster that was still partly Charlie.

"Now.....Now you can have that hug." Yelled Ruby. "I'm so sorry Charlie."

Ruby felt for the tiny spark of a God, but never had a chance to release it. The ship was rolling, starting to turn over on its side. Something exploded and Ruby lost her grip on the creature of flames. Getting out seemed to be a good idea. Ruby moved herself instantly to about a hundred feet above the rolling wreck of a once hugely expensive superyacht.

"Fuck." Ruby Muttered. Not a multipurpose expletive she used that often, but it suited what was happening below her.

Maybe it was the beast that had killed Colonel Arthur Moore, or maybe a few of them called Limbo their home ? It was large and strong enough to push the ship around like a toy. About the same size as a dinosaur skeleton she'd seen in a museum, but the monster was alive and had a lot of large muscles. Reptilian in looks, like a huge and very angry super lizard. Charlie was there, still in the form of the creature of flames. She was hurling magic at the monster, without appearing to cause it any damage. Ruby had knowledge of other worlds though, mainly told as anecdotes by Nazili. Many evenings had ended with Nazili and his anecdotes of strange worlds and those who inhabited them. The monster was either immune to magic, or from a world where Charlie's magic had no effect. "Oh, no." Muttered Ruby.

Ruby had wanted to kill Charlotte, but when the moment had come.....Better if it had been by her hands and less dreadful. But wasn't all killing dreadful ? The monster had turned quickly, surprisingly quickly for something so huge. Charlie's head and right shoulder had been removed from the rest of her body, in one fast bite. When it began to chew on what it had in its mouth, Ruby triggered the spark of Qalalu Karwancho. It had to be thorough, Charlotte had once returned from the dead, as had Ruby. Not being sure of the mechanism didn't help. Maybe just a few living cells could grow to become a new Charlie ? There could be no taking any chances, Ruby didn't want a second challenge to fight to the death. She poured incredible amounts of energy onto the monster and the surroundings. A red mist lowered over Ruby and she carried on covering everything in pure energy that had to be close to absolute maximum. When the rage lifted, miles of Limbo was nothing but glowing magma and blasted rocks. It had to look how the Earth had looked, before it had cooled down. Ruby looked very carefully, even walking over the bubbling magma. There were no remnants of the monster.....Or Charlotte.

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'London – Seven months later.'

Ruby still had the smile and it would always earn her a very good living. She'd mentioned her own utility bills to the CEO of Maxdan Energy. Triggers that simple were the best, especially if there was a little sexual tension. He'd thought about the report his analysts had prepared on the likely movement in oil prices the following year. Ruby memorised the key data, which she was becoming better at. She'd still need to type it all out, before going to bed that night. For some reason, she'd forget half of it while she slept. The report wasn't that valuable in itself, but for a commodity trader like George Polandrous, it was priceless.

"Send a text to George, Cal." She said. "Say I got everything he needed."

Cal was working for her now, a bona fide employee of a limited liability company Ruby was running out of Wilmington, Delaware. Cal still had Constanze to look after, though she now had her own apartment in a North London postcode that was supposed to be the next to gentrify. They left the merchant bank and Cal began to look for a black cab with its for hire light on. Ruby's cell phone rang and it was at least the tenth call that day from Sarah.

"On my way Sarah, I won't be late.....I promise." Said Ruby.

"Does he know the address ? Did you check that ?" Asked Sarah.

Sarah was nervous and handling it badly. Tempting to tell her it wasn't good for the child she was carrying, but that was a bit of a low blow. Sarah and Spider had agreed to try for a child once they were back home in London. Sarah hadn't flushed her contraceptive pills; she'd just stopped taking them for their last month or so in Peru. In a few weeks, Sara has going to give birth to a baby. A boy child according to all the scans. Ruby even had a print of a scan on her fridge and to her at least, it looked like a Rorschach test.

"Everything is going as planned." Said Ruby. "Come to my place in Hackney and they'll be there soon.....I promise."

"Lau really is sure it's him?"

"Yes, we've been over this at least a hundred times, Sarah.....Come to my flat."

Ruby hung up, which was often a bad move with Sarah. When they'd been at college together, Sarah had once rung her back over twenty times. For some reason Sarah had a thing about even numbers, so it was either twenty or twenty two times, Ruby couldn't remember exactly.

"No, Cal." Said Ruby. "You can't suddenly remember somewhere you have to be." Said Ruby.

"Actually.....I wouldn't miss it for the world." Said Cal. "Spider found in Peru and back from the dead. You wait; Sarah will calm down once she sees him."

"I hope you're right." Said Ruby.

Cal found a cab and Ruby settled herself on the large back seat. There was something about black cabs, a bit of comfort still flourishing in the Uber age. She ran recent events through her mind, hoping Lau hadn't got it dreadfully wrong. He was a wunderkind though; even the best fake Spider couldn't have fooled him.

Sarah had caused it all, with her certainty that Spider was still alive. Her confidence that Spider was still in the Nazca area had been infectious. As the saying goes, you can't argue with a confident woman. Even one with a history of crazy phone calls and anxiety.

"I just hope she doesn't expect him to be as he was." Said Ruby. "She'll need to be patient with him."

"She loves him and.....Sarah is having his child." Said Cal. "They'll be fine, I'm sure of it."

It couldn't be anyone who might be recognised from the explosion in Vista Alegre. Trudy had spent some time out there, looking and feeling her way through local towns. Lau had done most of the work and after close to seven months of searching, he'd found Spider behind a bar in Vista Alegre. "He sort of popped up like a beacon on my senses." Lau had told her. "One moment nothing, then there he was. He looked to have recently been in a knife fight. Oh, that scar on his face, Ruby. It's him though.....I'd bet my life on it."

It had taken a while for Spider to be able to travel and Ruby had wanted a picture, before telling Sarah. Spider knew who he was and most of his history, but there were gaps. According to Lau, there were periods of severe brain fog and confusion. It was Spider though and they were all going to need to be patient with him. Where had he been for all that time? No one knew and he had no idea. The cab pulled up right in front of where Ruby lived while in London.

"There is something about my Hackney flat." She muttered.

"I always loved living here." Said Cal. "What happened to Christine, the woman who looked after me?"

"The last I heard, Foxy was using her for something."

Sarah must have heard them. She'd come out of the flat and was sitting on the top step. Wearing a loose floppy dress, but still obviously pregnant, extremely pregnant as Sarah referred to it. Ruby helped her up and into the flat.

"Not long, they're five minutes away." Said Cal. "Ten minutes at the most, Lau just sent a text."

Poor Sarah, she couldn't even take the edge off with a few shots of vodka. She looked so anxious....Ruby had to ask.

"I could help with the anxiety, but only if you want me to."

"No, I want to be totally me when he arrives, no whammy." Said Sarah.

Constanze appeared, the ancient cat was still following Cal around, as she'd once followed Kallina. That helped, Sarah had always loved the old grey cat. She was still petting Constanze ten minutes later, when the entry phone began to buzz.

"Hello." Said Ruby.

"We're here." Said Lau.

Sarah stood up and asked the obvious question.

"How do I look?"

"Wonderful..... Glowing." Said Cal.

"I don't feel very glowing."

"Just kiss him when he arrives and everything will be fine." Said Ruby.

"Don't whammy me."

"Sarah.....If I was ever going to whammy you against your will, it would have been when we were at college. I still remember the night of twenty phone calls. Kiss him, Sarah.....Spider loves you."

Spider knew Sarah wasn't far off giving birth, but knowing and seeing were different. Ruby hoped he didn't make one of his silly jokes, or worse, look shocked. Lau came into the flat first, with Spider behind him. No saying hello from Spider, he went straight up to Sarah.

"I missed you so much." He said.

"I missed you more."

Sarah took Ruby's advice and slowly lunged in for a kiss. They kissed, a long kiss that soon became a full on snog.

"Oh, those two are going to be fine." Said Cal.

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~ The End ~

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I know some readers like a few statistics. The Ruby V word count is 156,737 or about 523 novel length pages.

There will always be something Ruby on the back burner, but probably not another novel. I was thinking of short stories centred around the major characters. I'm sure we all wonder how Spider will cope with having a son and a respectable job. And as I said at the end of the very first Ruby book.....

For Ruby; a gentle and lovely young woman, who allowed me to borrow her name and send it on a wild and strange adventure ~~

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