

Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

Chapter 5 – Travelling Freight

“George Polandrous was now semiretired. He’d never have accepted he was old, but it had seemed the right time to sell off a good piece of his equity in The Polandrous Foundation. Time to let others do the long hours and have the high blood pressure.”

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Ruby had expected Olga to want Julius Sima taken somewhere, anywhere other than her new mansion. Instead, she’d been quite happy for Ruby to interrogate him there, in a partitioned off part of the wine cellar.

“A prison that can quickly not be a prison, if the police ever bang on my door.”

Not that Ruby thought the Budapest police were likely to raid Olga. She put money into far too many pockets for that to happen. So, Ruby and Charlie had taken Julius to the wine cellar and into the room, that could quickly not look like a prison. It did currently look like a prison though, with the toilet in the corner and an uncomfortable looking single bed. The heavy chair with straps on the arms and legs, finished the general threatening aura. Sophie had strapped Julius into the chair and she hadn’t been gentle about doing it.

“Ask me anything, my life is an open book.” Said Julius.

Charlotte grinned at her, as she put her hands on Julius. He tensed, but Ruby knew there was no need to use pain. Pain had its uses if there was an urgent need for information, but even then, the information could be unreliable. Torture was unreliable because people would say just about anything to make it stop. Ruby could use her gifts to make anyone adore her, male or female. There was a sexual element, but at its most productive, it was love without desire. It might take a few hours, but in the end, Julius would tell her anything. Simply because he loved her more than life itself. It always worked, every single time without fail.

“Alright mister open book, tell me what you know about Caleb Friedman ?” Ruby asked.

Sadly, mind reading wasn’t like reading a book, there were no pages of information, or an index. All those synapses and neurones seemed to hold a random mess of data, unless you could bring a memory to the surface with a keyword or phrase. Charlie moved behind Julius and actually kissed his neck.

“Yes, tell us about Caleb.” Said Charlie.

Julius didn’t even try to resist; he obviously had no idea what Ruby was doing. Some who had an inkling filled their mind with random nonsense, or hummed an earworm in their mind. For some reason ‘When will I be famous,’ by Bros was used by over half of those who attempted to block her. Eventually though, none of the blocks worked.

“How good was Caleb at stealing data ?” Asked Ruby.

It was like using a search engine on the internet. Ask a few questions, trying the words in a different order and eventually, clear and accurate memories appeared out of the mess of thoughts. Not only had Julius known Caleb for a while, it seemed that poor hard done to Caleb, had actually suggested trying to steal data from Gallaan Industries. Then it had become a little heavy, so Julius had hired an expert to fuck with Caleb’s mind.

"I have no idea what you mean." Said Julius. "I'm not aware of knowing anyone called Caleb Friedman."

At one time Ruby had found it strange, to hear lies while seeing the truth in someone's mind. After digging around in the minds of the rich and famous for George Polandrous, she was now used to it.

"Who did you use to scratch out his memories?" Asked Ruby. "Who was the expert you used to wipe bits of Caleb's mind? They did a good job; it can't have been cheap."

"Yes, they must have charged you a small fortune." Said Charlie.

Ruby held Sima's hand, while Charlie gently blew on his neck. Not new techniques, most security services used some form of induced empathy as an interrogation technique. Julius now wanted to be helpful and it seemed the amount he'd had to pay the memory manipulator had bothered him at the time. Julius thought of the man as a consultant. Quite a young man, though well known in the small circle who might need his services. The amount he charged though; it was absurd.

"Two hundred thousand dollars.....Why not simply kill Caleb?" Asked Charlie.

Ruby hadn't forgotten that she and Charlie were both looking into the mind of Julius. She might not have mentioned a specific amount of cash, but it was merely that they had different ways of working, different styles.

"Does the consultant have a name?" Asked Ruby.

Julius had a few thoughts about a young man with hair so blonde, it was almost pure white. When all she could see in Sima's mind was a grey cloud, she knew that in some way, she'd triggered a mental trap. It was rare, but the one and only other time, the person strapped in a chair, had died.

"Fuck, his heart just stopped." Said Charlie

On a really good day and with a lot of time to prepare, Ruby might have been able to stop the trap from killing him. It was hard to get the mind to kill itself, but it could be done. Something to do with the way the unconscious mind could trigger everything from panic attacks to a full-blown seizure. Probably by linking with the brain stem, though she wasn't sure. It wasn't the sort of thing you could ask your GP about. Julius had yellow fluid dribbling out of his mouth and he was dead. He was dead far too fast for her to have stopped it. Maybe not a huge loss to the world. He wasn't going to tell them anything else though.

"Oh, I should have expected that." Ruby said. "How much did you get before he died?"

"Just a young guy with blonde hair." Said Charlie. "It seems a weird name, but right at the end, just before his heart stopped. Julius thought of the guy as Flex. Might be a name, or....Something else."

"I got about the same. Really blonde hair and very thin." Said Ruby. "When we eventually meet this Flex, we'll definitely recognise him."

So, they were leaving a body for Olga to deal with. Not that it hadn't happened before and Ruby was sure Olga might complain, but she wouldn't really mind. Olga had a need to be needed. Similarly, Eugenie might complain for months about it, but she too had a similar need.

"I'll ask Olga to keep digging about Julius and Flex." Said Ruby. "She'll need help, our kind of help. I'm going to ask Eugenie to get on the first plane to Budapest."

"Oh Ruby, you won't be popular."

"She'll moan, but I wouldn't mind betting, she's been hoping I'd call. She can bring her new lover with her if she likes."

"Do you think he knows she's.....You know?" Asked Charlie

"High maintenance you mean? I'm sure he does. As for her being a little human plus, I'd guess not. She can bring him here; it will give her a cover story for anything unusual that might happen. Being linked to a Hungarian mobster is far better than having something not human in her DNA."

“And to be honest, it’s far more believable.” Said Charlie.

Ruby grinned at Charlie, who grinned back. It was gone, the dark cloud between them. It had been there since events in Africa, but now it was gone. Once Ruby might have wondered what had changed, but now she understood. Flex seemed to be a worthy adversary and they still had Baba Yaga to deal with. Then there was no telling where a long talk with Max might send them off to. Life was dangerous again, it was exciting. Ruby and her wunderkinds were involved in a modern-day version of the Wild Hunt. It excited them and woke something inside them that hated being forced to sleep.

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Their last night in Budapest, at least for a while. Spider had fallen in love with the city and so had Sarah. Olga always seemed to have more going on than her people could deal with and she had once talked about hiring his services. Just for a while, he was a Londoner at heart, it would always be home. He was undressing, while watching Sarah get ready for bed. He just got naked and jumped between the sheets, but Sarah.....There was a whole creams and moisturiser ritual. He’d offered to help her a few times, but it inevitably led to more sex than moisturising.

“How about coming here for a while ?” He asked. “After we’ve helped Ruby of course. Just for a few months. I know Olga would say yes to hiring me.”

“Most of my business is online.” Said Sarah. “I can work from anywhere with a decent internet connection. There are letters and bills of course.....It would need some planning.”

“But on the whole, you like the idea ?” He asked.

“I like it enough to say let’s talk about it seriously, once we’re home again.”

No matter how much you love someone, getting naked before going to bed, becomes routine. Spider could appreciate Sarah was sex on lovely legs, without lust automatically kicking in. There were times though, when she leant at a certain angle, to apply something to her legs. She’d turn and smile and.....

“Can I help with that ?” He asked.

“There are spots I find hard to reach.”

Sex followed, it invariably did. He dreaded to think how much of her various pots of stuff had been spilled, or had ended up on him instead of her. Spider thought the stuff had to be made out of unicorn poo, judging by how much Sarah paid for it. After the sex he slept, only to wake up at about four in the morning, troubled by something. A secret he’d promised to keep, that maybe he shouldn’t have kept a secret.

“Sarah, are you awake ?”

Of course, she wasn’t, but she was after he’d kissed her cheek a few times. He doubted if he’d smile after being woken up at four am, but she smiled at him.

“I love you, but go back to sleep.” She said.

“There’s something I need to tell you.” He said. “Ruby needs to know, but I’ll start by telling you.”

Sarah turned to face him, using her elbow to shove the pillow about a bit.

“Alright, but if this is an excuse for early morning sex.....”

“No.....It’s about how I knew Lily was being held in Landen. Foxy not only knew, he told me where she was. Not exactly, just that she was in a walled compound in Landen, in Belgium. He told me Ruby’s usual sources of information would be able to find the place.”

“Oh, what ? Did Foxy send someone to see you ?”

From cosy and relaxed to glaring and angry in about five seconds. The love of his life was giving off a distinctly pissed off vibe.

“No, it was Foxy himself and I was working. Big Eric had sent me to see a guy he’d loaned a few thousand. A restaurant in Acton that had needed tarting up a bit. Nothing heavy, I just had to remind the guy that something refurbished, could be un-refurbished really quickly. I was coming out with a two grand part payment in my pocket and feeling pleased with myself. There, on the pavement on the opposite side of the road.....It was him, Foxy, complete with pin stripe suit and old school tie.”

“Are you making all this up ?”

“No, why would I ? We went into a local café for coffee. Then Foxy told me all about Lily being in Landen and that Ruby needed to rescue her.....Quickly. He then told me to keep his involvement a secret.”

“But, surely Foxy could have used his people to get Lily out of there.” Said Sarah.

“I know, I don’t understand it either.”

“Why shouldn’t Ruby know ?”

“I know....You’re looking at me like I’m being awkward, when I simply don’t know things. I was in the army for year, as you know. When a guy with a knighthood and an expensive suit, talks about official secrets and the national interest.....I tend to go along with it. It was how I was trained; it’ll be with me forever. Foxy told me to tell no one he was involved, no one.”

“Ruby will be very angry.” Sais Sarah.

“I know, we can tell her over breakfast.”

“Not we, you can tell her. I’ll just sit quietly and glare at you.”

“Fine.”

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Olga’s mansion had thick strong walls and good soundproofing. A definite improvement on the motel in Landen, where sex noises could be heard all night. Ruby was fast asleep in her room, completely oblivious to what might be going on in other rooms. She’d seen Anna and Delmar going hand in hand, into the same bedroom, but they were both consenting adults. What they did was their business. Besides, Sarah was a gossip addict, who’d tell her everything that was going on. The noise of a cat scratching the floor and crying, woke her up.

“Go to sleep Constanze.” She muttered.

By the time Ruby woke up enough to remember she was in Budapest, not Hackney, the noises had stopped. She didn’t need to get out of bed, or even turn on the bedside lamp. Her extra senses told her that no living being was in her room, apart from her. It was stress, Julius Sima shouldn’t have died. She should have gone slower with the interrogation and been far more careful. As she began to drift off to sleep, the sound of a cat crying returned.

“Oh, stop that Constanze.” She said.

Half asleep again and sat on the edge of her bed, looking for a cat her wide-awake mind knew was happily asleep in a neighbour’s flat in Hackney. Ruby turned on the bedside lamp and simply sat there for a moment, wondering whether it might be easier to give up on getting anymore sleep. Constanze was an old cat, very old. She sometimes became anxious at night and needed a cuddle. It was hardly surprising that Ruby’s unconscious mind would use the cat’s crying as a wakeup call, an anxiety alarm.

“I didn’t want Julius to die, he’d have been more use alive.” She mumbled.

As she sat on the edge of the bed, her tired mind began to wander. Half asleep and half awake, she began to see things that weren’t always real, or necessarily hallucinations. A lot of people had it happen for one reason or another, though humans were unlikely to have it in such a vivid way as her. A stain on a wall that turns into a spider, that runs up the wall. The face of a loved one that

appears to evaporate. Those were the ordinary things, the way it effected most people. Hypnogenesis Kallina called it, though there was probably a medical term for it. The mind's unconscious trick of altering perception in the area between the real world and dreams. With Ruby it often went further, conversations with people who had been nothing but a dream. She'd even spent time with poor Kurt once, in the semi-reality of her dreams. Sometimes everything felt so.....Real.

"If your dreams can affect you, maybe even hurt you." Kallina had once said. "Then they sound pretty real to me. Don't be too bothered about what is and isn't reality Ruby Ann Mason, just experience it all and take what you need from it."

There was a shadow where the wardrobe blocked the bedside lamp. As she watched, the shadow widened and spread a little. Ruby began to sense that she was no longer the only living entity in the room. The raspy cough gave her enough information to identify her nocturnal visitor. She'd have known that cough anywhere.

"Ah, Kallina.....I wondered when you'd come to me." Said Ruby. "Was that you watching Nari, while she was on the way to Belgium?"

"Of course it was, who else?"

"Are you real, or am I imagining it?" Asked Ruby.

Kallina laughed; a laugh Ruby had heard so many times.

"You always were too obsessed with reality Ruby. Reality is over rated. Thank you for looking after Constanze, I hoped you would."

"I could hardly let her starve. The poor thing is over two hundred and thirty years old."

"Yes, I still don't know how I managed to give her such a long life. Accidents can happen with certain spells and unguents. Even witches like Baba Yaga can be mystified by weird and unforeseen consequences. Constanze may well live forever, though please keep it as our secret. Unforeseen circumstances are a little.....Embarrassing.

"Your secret is safe with me."

Ruby could tell Kallina was free of the evil that had taken her over in Africa. She got off the bed and began to walk closer to the shadow next to the wardrobe.

"No Ruby, that is close enough. The way I look is unpleasant."

The creature in the shadow was crouched up against the floor and there was the smell of corruption in that corner of the room. It was a miracle she was alive, yet she obviously hadn't managed to fully heal herself.

"I'm so sorry Kallina. I have so many things to feel regret for, but hurting you.....I regret that most of all."

"Nonsense, I was under the influence of that monster and wanted to kill you all. If I'd been you, I'd have tracked me down right away and vaporised me until I was just a cloud of white-hot plasma. I have a few of its memories, they're a worse punishment than being.....Like this."

Ruby sat cross legged on the floor and could just about see what she'd done to Kallina. Her friend looked like a pile of broken bones. Kallina's head and face appeared to be perched on top of something that no longer even resembled a human.

"Oh Kallina, how did you survive?"

"It was once said that Baba Yaga is too wicked to die. God doesn't want me and the devil fears me, or so the saying goes. The Russians even have a nursery rhyme about me, the undying midwife. I have no idea why they called me that, but the name sounds very Russian."

"I'll talk to the others." Said Ruby. "They may take a while to get used to the idea, but I will talk them into it. You have my word; you will be healed."

“Or of course, this might all be a dream and I’m not real.”

“Oh, I know you Kallina, you’re real enough.”

“You will need me; I can see where your path leads. A cold land far to the north and you will definitely need Baba Yaga and her control of the elements. Go to see Max first though. He’s lazy and useless, but he has a few interesting tales to tell.”

“Just give me a day or two. You did hurt a lot of people.” Said Ruby.

“Don’t forget Ruby, don’t wake up and think it was all nothing but a dream.”

Ruby woke up still cross legged, which meant her knees were agony. On the bedroom floor where the shadow had been were words, burned into Olga’s expensive looking carpet.

‘Don’t forget – K’

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Luca Lengyel had once envisaged a more traditional route for her career. She was going to get good grades at school, before working hard at medical school. She was going to be a damned good doctor; it had been her ambition since the age of about ten or eleven. If a cute guy turned up while she was becoming a doctor, that’d be great. Becoming a doctor was top of her list though, everything else had to wait. Then the harsh realities of life had arrived and refused to be ignored. Her family weren’t wealthy and becoming a doctor turned out to be more expensive than she’d realised. Luca’s money was running out, her huge dream was in jeopardy. Then a friend had introduced her to Olga.

She still remembered the first time she’d dug a bullet out of one of Olga’s thugs, one of her best guys as Luca only found out later. The man had been on a grubby table in a grubby cellar. The sort of place where any self-respecting veterinarian would have refused to operate on an injured dog. She’d dug a bullet out of the man’s chest. Best of all the man had survived the bullet and the procedure to remove it. Aron had been the man’s name and he was killed less than a year later. Olga had given her an envelope with cash inside the night she’d saved Aron, a lot of cash. It wasn’t just the money that kept her working for Olga, though that was important. It was the experience of treating wounds and other injuries, that most other student doctors only saw once or twice in their career. Terrible wounds that would have been more familiar to the medical people treating the injuries suffered by Roman legionaries. Plus....And Luca rarely admitted it to herself, there was a real buzz out of being a valued member of Olga’s gang.

She was currently looking at a row of half a dozen buckets, barely hidden behind a canvas screen. Anna had moaned about the lack of gender specific toilet facilities on the cargo plane, so Sophie had gone to work with an indelible marker. Half on the buckets were marked ‘Men,’ while the other half were marked ‘Women.’

“Well, at least they have lids.” Luca shouted.

“Just squat, close your eyes and think of England.” Yelled Anna.

“I’m Polish.”

“Then think of Poland.”

Someone, probably Anna, had remembered toilet tissue, hand sanitizer and a couple of towels. It was only for a day though and Luca had known worse. She’d once shared student digs, a house with several women her own age. There had been no lock on the bathroom door, which meant zero privacy. Luca adjusted her clothing, as if no one would realise why she’d visited the screened off third of their available space.

“It’s only for a day.” Said Ruby.

“It’s fine, I’ve known worse.....Student accommodation.”

“Prison is the worst.” Added Spider.

No one seemed to feel like arguing with him. Luca went back to the piece of memory foam she'd claimed and after getting comfortable, she picked up the book she'd been meaning to read for months. Most people thought cargo planes weren't pressurised, but most were. Planes carried a variety of freight and parcels, which could contain items that wouldn't survive drastic changes in air pressure. Some might even explode. The twenty foot by ten foot area of the hold, that was theirs, was comfortable, pressurised and heated. All they had to do was get through over twenty hours of total boredom.

Spider had confessed to keeping secrets from Ruby, he'd told her over breakfast. They'd all heard it, about him getting information from the British secret service. Luca didn't really understand why Ruby was still so angry, information was information to her, no matter where it came from. There was likely to be a few harsh words spoken, now they were all together in a tiny space. Luca got back into her book, a fantasy about a school for magicians.

"Oh, wake me up when we get to Nairobi." Said Roger.

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George Polandrous was now semiretired. He'd never have accepted he was old, but it had seemed the right time to sell off a good piece of his equity in The Polandrous Foundation. Time to let others do the long hours and have the high blood pressure. He was still the public face of the foundation, but he was content to run their office in Paris. He went in three days a week, which meant having time to see more of Malou. He'd lived in the hotel for a while, until finding an apartment not that far from where Charlotte now lived.

"I like Le Monde, a great paper." Said George. "If it's possible though, can your reception get me The Times?"

"I think that could be arranged." Said Malou.

He turned and she was laughing at him. They'd known each other since.....It was a hell of a long time. Yet she was still amused by his Englishness. They never had officially told the hotel staff they were together, though everyone obviously knew. Routine had given them away, the staff now put an extra breakfast on Malou's tray, for the mornings they knew he'd be there. Malou liked breakfast on the table by her bedroom window. Breakfast in bed sounded wonderfully romantic, but any sudden movement and it could end up as a messy disaster. George turned to give Malou a little privacy to get out of bed and into her gown. He may have seen her naked many times, but it seemed polite to let her get out of bed, while preserving her dignity.

"Hmmm, the coffee here is the best in Paris." Said George.

"I still prefer tea."

It had become a wonderful routine on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Dinner in a decent restaurant within walking distance, followed by a movie on cable TV. Not the most exciting routine in the world, but he always stayed the night. Waking up next to Malou, still gave him the same buzz of excitement, as it had when they'd both been in their twenties.

"Is Ruby keeping you up to date with what's going on?" He asked.

"To a point, she'll always have her secrets. I heard from Eugenie, who I think was instructed to tell me by Ruby. It seems she's been ordered to go to Budapest. I bet she's angry about that."

George knew all the wunderkinds well; he'd spend quite a lot of time with each of them. Eugenie always said she'd settle for a quiet life, though he'd never quite believed her.

"I think she'll love being ordered into action." He said. "It shows that Ruby considers her to be indispensable. Is she taking her new boyfriend?"

“Yes, I couldn’t believe it at first. She’s taking Lorenzo with her. When I asked about him seeing anything he shouldn’t see, she said she can always make him disappear. Well....She laughed after saying it, but that girl has a weird sense of humour.”

George knew ‘that girl’ had been born in Paris in eighteen twenty nine, as did Malou. It was how they looked of course, what seemed to be a permanently youthful physical appearance.

“The bacon is perfect today.” He said.

“Tell the kitchen how you like it and they’ll do it.” Said Malou. “No good expecting them to be mind readers, George.”

There she was, grinning about his Englishness again. So, he liked his bacon not to be cooked to a cinder. Though she was right, he did sometimes have a problem with making sure he got what he wanted.

“So, what did you find when you checked Lorenzo out ?” He asked.

“I’d never do that....Eugenie has a right to privacy.”

The tables were turned, it was his turn to grin at her.

“Yeah right, as Ruby would say. Did you find anything we need to worry about ?” He asked.

“No George, seriously. I’d never do that.”

He simply looked at her, trying not to blink. He’d once had an employee admit to a little minor embezzlement, just by giving them the long stare. Malou was good, she lasted about five full minutes.

“Alright, but it was all done discreetly.” Said Malou. “His name is Lorenzo Bianchi, though Eugenie calls him Lol. A good family, a decent education and he did well at college. Just one problem with the police, he stole a car when he as fourteen. It looks to have been a weird one off, he’s been a model Italian citizen since then. His Facebook wall is full of pictures of Eugenie.”

“What a bastard, we’ll get Sophie to kill him and dispose of the body.” He said.

There were a few mutual smiles. It seemed Eugenie’s new boyfriend had a fraction of the number of weird things in his past than any of the wunderkinds. His was on official record though, whereas Eugenie’s mishaps were private, known only to a tiny few.

“Wait until Lorenzo meets Olga.” Said Malou.

“Oh yes, she can take a bit of getting used to.”

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Anna hadn’t seen Mukami Kibore since leaving Africa, though there had been a few phone calls. She’d heard he’d got out of the tours of the rift valley business, but there he was. Mukami had liked to be called Doc. He’d vowed never to work for Ruby again, after all the violence and trouble in Uganda. But there he was....

“Wow, nice new trucks Doc.” Said Anna. “You must be doing well.”

Three brand new trucks with eye catching artwork on the side. Kibore’s Tours in a fancy font, surrounded by well-drawn animals of the rift valley. Anna hugged him, of course she did. They had shared a sleeping bag in the back of a truck for quite some time. It looked like Ruby had kept her word to compensate Doc well for all the trouble, she always did keep her word.

“I got a call from Olga.” Said Doc. “I could hardly let you guys travel across Kenya in a long-haul delivery truck.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t looking forward to that.” Said Sophie.

“How far are you going with us ?” Asked Anna.

“Just as far the docks in Mombasa.” Said Doc. “I can get you there in comfort. I know places, discreet places. I can get you to Mombasa unseen, but you’ll still get a decent meal and proper bathroom facilities.”

“Oh Doc, I love you.” Said Sarah.

Sarah hugged Doc, then Sophie, then just about everyone else, including Spider. If hugging Doc was awkward for Ruby, she didn’t show it.

“You’re a nice surprise, Doc.” Said Ruby.

“Olga can be very persuasive.”

The Kibore’s Tours trucks were inside the perimeter fence of Nairobi’s Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. Less than twenty yards from where the cargo plane had come to a stop. Doc still knew everyone it seemed and had access to just about everywhere.

“There are window blinds, Ruby.” Said Doc. “No one will know you’re in Kenya.”

It took a while to get their things out of the plane, they were already carrying a lot of equipment that might be needed in Mogadishu. As for the buckets.....They were left behind, though Anna did pity whoever had the job of cleaning the aircraft. The trucks had blinds, but they also had open windows and plentiful supplies of bottled water and nibbles. After a day in a cramped cargo hold, Doc’s trucks felt like a little piece of heaven.

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They’d stopped once in a village Doc hadn’t even named. A quick stop to use the bathrooms, in what looked like a local bus garage. Ruby noticed there were children, there always seemed to be families running such places. They all knew Doc and treated him like one of the family. One family had been hurt when she’d travelled across Kenya the last time. This time would be different though, she hoped. Doc didn’t seem worried, though no one was introduced to them, or they to them. They were just friends of Doc’s, wanting a little privacy about their travel arrangement.

“You were never here Ruby Mason.” Doc had told her. “None of us were ever here. Even their eight year old daughter will swear to that.”

Their main stop for a meal was going to be in Mtito Andei, a town in Makueni County. Doc had announced that there would be a meal with the family, but he didn’t want to stop again before reaching Mombasa. It seemed that Doc knew people who worked for the railway. They had a large house and mouths that were famously never known to repeat gossip, or tell a secret.

“They’re nice people.” Doc had said.

The first time crossing Africa, things had been different. Doc had contacts right across the region and everyone had been introduced. From the oldest great grandparent, to the smallest child. Ruby and her wunderkinds had been introduced to them all, they’d known every name. This time they weren’t even given names for the people who drove the four-wheel drive safari trucks. The house was quite close to Mtito Andei Railway Station, though Doc would only say the family worked for the railway.

“Take your time, no rush.” Doc said. “Then we’ll push on and get to Mombasa before dark.”

The family were almost invisible, vanishing into the kitchen to make them a meal. Only a child of no more than three, remained to stare at the strangers. That suited Ruby, it gave her a chance to talk about Kallina.

“This seems an ideal time to tell you.” She said. “I’ve had contact with Kallina.”

Charlotte reacted the most strongly, Ruby could see the creature of fire in her eyes. She had their full attention, so she told them every detail of her conversation with Kallina. Or the contents of a very vivid dream, it really might have been either one.

“Was it even real ?” Asked Sarah.

“As Kallina has often said to me, reality is over rated. I don’t think it matters if Kallina was in my bedroom, or she invaded my dreams in some way. She’s hurt and needs our help to become fully healed. As Baba Yaga, she is the most powerful out of any of us. We really could do with her help.”

“Are you sure she’s not still.....Dangerous ?” Asked Anna.

“I am, the presence that took her over has gone, completely gone.” Said Ruby.

“No, let her cure herself.” Snapped Charlie. “If it takes her a thousand years, that’s fine with me.”

“She has a point.” Said Sophie. “Personally, I may never fully trust her again.”

“Who is Baba Yaga ?” Asked Caleb.

Ruby had told him he wasn’t trusted before leaving Budapest. Since then and after hearing about some of his missing memories, it had been like having a ghost with them. Apart from the essential questions involved with food and hygiene, he’d barely spoken.

“Talk to Sophie during the sea voyage to Mogadishu.” She said. “She can give you the full Baba Yaga 101 course.”

“I know some of it, but I wouldn’t mind a refresher.” Said Lily.

“Same here....I think all us muggles might need an update.” Said Luca.

Ruby looked at Sophie, who raised her eyebrows, but nodded.

“Alright, see Sophie while we’re on the Ajax.” Said Ruby. “Ideally I’d put the vote off until you’re all up to date, but there isn’t time for that.”

It was the word vote that had caused it. Ruby had their attention, even Caleb’s and he was prone to losing focus and regularly zoning out.

“A vote.” Said Sophie. “You always say we’re not a democracy.”

“I will give my opinion; I think Kallina is essential and we should heal her. She was the first mother most you ever knew, that has to gain her a lot of forgiveness. Think about it and we’ll vote after the meal, on whether to heal her, or tell her we want nothing more to do with her.”

“That sounds a bit harsh.” Said Sarah.

“Harsh, you didn’t see her.” Said Ruby. “Harsh is being a crippled pile of bones. Anyway.....I promise to honour the result of the vote, whichever way it goes. No comments, no grudges held. We have the vote today and move on.”

“We should leave her to rot.” Said Charlotte.

“But.....It’s Kallina.” Said Roger.

The family arrived with the meal, though they didn’t eat with them. Ruby knew the food tasted good, but apart from that, she had no idea what it was. Chicken probably, with some kind of vegetables. Most of her mind was taken up by how to tell Kallina they weren’t going to help her, if it came to that. All the quiet conversation over dinner was all about the vote.

“Do we have to vote now, today ?” Asked Lily.

“Yes, we do. If we agree to heal her, it has to start immediately.” Said Ruby.

After the meal was finished, there was coffee, while the family dealt with the dirty plates. Ruby left it until Doc was calling them out to the trucks, before taking the vote.

“Alright.....Raise your hand if you think we should heal Kallina and let her be one of us again.”

“Do I get a vote ?” Asked Doc.

“No.”

Ruby had deliberately not felt the minds in the room, the likely result was unknown to her. At best she’d hoped for a majority in favour of healing Baba Yaga. Every hand was raised. Good, there could be no arguments later about a unanimous vote. Ruby did give Charlotte a questioning look.

“You’re right, we will need her.” Said Charlie.

“Thank you, all of you.” Said Ruby. “I’ll let Kallina know.”

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