

Ruby 3

Chapter 2 - Marrakesh

“Ruby had to be in the right mood for a conversation with Kallina and being properly awake was essential. It was three in the morning and a familiar cat with grey fur, was purring and licking her nose.”

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Sarah Simmons loved Marrakesh; it was one of the few places she'd visited more than once. Many thought of the city as a dry hot place. It could get very hot in the summer, but it was always green. Some of the gardens were large, lush and world famous. Most of all, Sarah liked the fact that as long as you didn't hurt anyone or make a nuisance of yourself, no one cared what you got up to. Even when she'd been young and penniless, she'd never enjoyed backpacker hostels or holidays under canvas. Sarah now admitted to being in her early thirties, though she always refused to be precise. She had money and a definite taste for the decadent way of life..... She'd hired a house with a walled garden and pool, for a month.

“It is lovely here, but we must dress and go out.” Said Monique. “A little shopping in a bazaar perhaps, we haven't been to Jemaa el-Fnaa yet.”

“Do we have to ?” Asked Fabio. “Why not a whole day by the pool ?”

Sarah had brought Monique because she shared her own view of the world. Fabio was a little less adventurous, but they came as a pair. Not a couple in the usual boy girl way, they'd built up a deep friendship over the years. Both of them were Ruby's wunderkinds, the thirteen gifted children who were part human and part something far older. Monique had been born somewhere in the Middle East, probably around seventeen hundred, no one was certain. Fabio was younger, having been born in Naples in eighteen forty five. Both were travelling on fake passports, which gave their age as twenty three.

“Much as I adore shopping, I'm a little souked out.” Said Sarah. “How about visiting one of the gardens ?”

“Jardins de l'Agdal is supposed to be nice, there's a huge pond full of carp.” Said Fabio. “And it's close to the Marrakesh Museum.”

Sarah expected Monique to snort at Fabio. Despite their friendship, they were as different as chalk and cheese. Instead Monique nodded at him.

“Issam said the museum is interesting and there are lot of nice places to eat nearby.” She said.

Sarah had no idea who Issam was, probably the young man she'd seen leaving just before breakfast. Like her, Monique was enjoying a little variety in her holiday flings. It had been an American girl leaving just after dawn the previous morning. As for Fabio ? He was a little more discreet, but Sarah was sure he wasn't living the life of a monk.

“So how about the museum, the gardens and then a meal somewhere ?” Asked Sarah. “Let's have a show of hands.... All in favour.”

They both liked the idea, but neither seemed inclined to leave the pool. Sarah set things in motion by going to her room to shower and get into some outdoor clothes. Her room was a mess of course. From student digs, through social housing, to the flat she'd bought; her bedroom always looked like a badly organised church jumble sale. From cheap knock off jeans to Giorgio Armani, the sad thing

was that drop them on the bedroom floor and they all looked like jumble. Sarah took off the few clothes she was wearing for a morning by the pool, and stepped into the shower.

After drying herself, Sarah stood in front of the full length mirror on the wardrobe. Wrinkles and nipple hair were two of her most harmless obsessions, and the mirror showed her nothing to worry about. Despite her hedonistic lifestyle she was skinny, perhaps a little too skinny. Now that would worry her for the rest of the day. Only one friend really understood the way her mind worked and she hadn't called her in months.

"What to wear?" She muttered.

Sarah knew the trick with Muslim countries like Morocco. Dress to cover as much flesh as possible, without over doing it. The locals didn't expect westerners to dress and look like locals, and anyway her pale skin and long blonde hair meant that was impossible. She dressed in something long and fairly swirly and then added a head scarf.

"Perfect." She said to the mirror.

Sarah wasn't like Ruby and her super children, neither was spider. Her only super power was the ability to learn languages, to soak them in like a sponge. Even then, she hadn't realised the potential of that ability to earn her a decent living. Now she had a translation company with some prestigious clients. She also owned a web design company that offered to build websites in any language. From being penniless and living in social housing, because of her 'problems,' she now owned her own place in London and took holidays in rented villas.

"Come on Fabio, we're ready." Said Monique.

He was a guy who owned about four pairs of jeans and half a dozen shirts, yet they were always having to wait for him. Monique had a theory that he must have a hundred different pairs of designer socks to choose from.

"Sorry, I'm ready." He said.

It wasn't that hot out, Sarah had booked a holiday in the early summer, rather than later when the weather really became hot. It was a long walk into the centre of town, but they weren't in a hurry. One day they hadn't ended up anywhere near where they'd intended. That was one of the wonderful things about holidays, finding places by serendipity.

"Oh..... Did you? I could have sworn...."

"What's wrong Sarah?" Asked Monique.

"I'm not sure..... I had that feeling, you know.... Weird, my mum used to call it a shiver, as though someone had walked over her grave."

They were exchanging looks, she knew what was coming.

"Hmmm.... Mix a bit more tonic in with your vodka tonight." Said Monique.

Nothing from Fabio, he was either too polite, or too scared of her to comment. They both thought it though, every eccentricity was blamed on booze. Ruby was the same and the really annoying thing was, she suspected they might be right.

"It's just a hot day." She said. "Ignore me..... I'll be fine."

The feeling persisted and really hit her as they crossed a busy square. Sarah had the definite feeling someone was stalking her, someone she knew. She even thought she saw someone in a doorway, someone wearing dark clothing. It had been out of the corner of her eye and when she turned to look..... They'd gone. Sarah tried not to react, but Monique must have seen her twitch.

"You're not crazy, I feel it too." Said Monique.

"Crazy, both of you." Said Fabio.

A street where the feeling went away, though Sarah saw the person in dark clothing in another doorway. A woman, definitely a woman, though Sarah had no idea how she knew that.

"We're too out in the open, it might be an enemy." Said Monique.

"Who'd want to harm me?" Asked Sarah. "I haven't been up to anything likely to upset anyone in years. Well..... Not so upset they'd want to hurt me."

"Might be someone's jealous wife." Suggested Fabio.

"Not funny, not funny at all." Said Monique. "We should get off the street and into a crowd....The railway station is just over the road, that'll do."

Sarah followed Monique across the road and into the Marrakesh Railway Station. It was fairly crowded, though they hadn't lost her stalker. Sarah felt her behind them and then quickly, she was in front of them.

"Stop." She said. "She's in here.... We should have stayed in the street."

Monique saw her first, the woman in dark clothing who looked as though she'd spent all her life on the streets of Marrakesh. It was what she was good at, fitting in, merging herself into the local population.

"Ruby." Said Monique.

Fabio joined her in running towards Ruby, the person all the wunderkinds thought of as their second mother. Sarah didn't know what to do, her last phone message to Ruby had been rude and aggressive. Not that it wasn't well deserved.

"They thought you were a stalker." Said Fabio.

"I suppose in a way, I am a stalker." Said Ruby. "I promise not to leave without seeing you both, but for now... I need to talk to Sarah, if that's alright?"

"Of course it is, we'll go to the museum." Said Monique.

Ruby was looking straight at her, grinning.

"Is that alright with you Sarah?" She asked. "Can we talk?"

"I suppose so."

They managed to find somewhere to sit, right in front of a row of shops. It was a little noisy, but Sarah knew that a bit of background noise can be good at keeping a conversation private. The station hall was light and airy; she'd had difficult meetings in far worse places.

"I'm sorry Sarah; I should have returned your calls." Said Ruby.

"I do understand how you must have felt when Serge died.....It was just that you seemed to be punishing me, as though it was my fault."

"No, no Sarah, I never felt like that. It was just.....This will sound cruel, but it isn't meant to be. With so much filling my head, there wasn't any room for your problems. I'm sorry, really sorry."

Sarah wanted to be angry, but memories were flooding her mind. There had been the night which had bonded them, caused her to follow Ruby to so many places on the path less travelled. Memories of the car park of a seedy South London pub. The Alma, that was it. Named after a battle in a war everyone had forgotten, a pub with a very bad reputation.

She'd found Ruby holding the body of a woman who'd been beaten to death. She still didn't know how she'd done it, but Sarah had managed to get Ruby home, cleaned up and into bed. Sarah felt for Ruby's hand and held it.

"You could have said something to me." Said Sarah. "I'd have understood."

"I did try, I'm sure I tried....It was just that..... One night you called me over twenty times."

It sounded about right to Sarah. Always an even number of calls, she had no idea where that particular obsession had begun.

"I'm sorry Ruby, I just felt pushed away..... After all, it was me who helped you after Myriam was beaten to death."

Myriam had been Ruby's partner in all sorts of ways, though Sarah only found that out later. They tried to scam an infamous South London gang and Myriam had paid the ultimate price.

"You promised Sarah." Said Ruby. "We agreed to never talk about that night again."

More memories of that dreadful night filled her head. Sarah had heard some people did survive terrible head injuries, but not half their head being caved in. The blood, that was the shocking thing, it seemed to cover the body, Ruby and the side of the transit van.

"They hit her and kept on hitting her." Ruby had told her.

Sarah didn't like anything official, never had, never would. The police she saw as her personal nemesis. She knew Ruby had to get away, and anyway, the people who'd killed Myriam might come back. Sarah had managed to get Ruby to safety, though she'd never told Ruby what she'd found while looking through her flat for clean clothes and towels. When she'd gone to find a towel she'd found a cupboard with money in it. Not money from being a shop lifter, or even from being a drug dealer. This had been serious money, the sort that gets people's heads caved in behind pubs with bad reputations.

"Sometimes you need reminding about Myriam." Said Sarah. "It was me who helped you that night, not Sophie or Charlotte. There was no thirteen around then, just you and me."

"There's no need to be jealous Sarah."

"I'm not fucking jealous." She yelled.

A lot of heads turned their way and Sarah didn't really care. Ruby was hugging her, they'd look like two crazy westerners who had no idea of how to behave in public.

"I'm so sorry Sarah.....I should have answered that twentieth call."

"It's not that I'm jealous, I love Sophie, Charlie and the others. We were so close once and now.....You treated me as though I was just some girl you knew from college."

"I never meant to Sarah, you're just about my oldest friend."

Sarah felt better and it crossed her mind that Ruby was using her gifts at a very low setting. Spider often thought the same, though like her, he was never certain. There was something definitely going on around Ruby, even if she was doing it unconsciously. It was the reason Sarah had never stolen from Ruby, ever, even when she was eating cat food to survive until the next welfare payment arrived. You didn't steal from Ruby. For some reason it was impossible to steal from Ruby.

Sarah knew the story almost by heart. Ruby had come home early and caught Spider in her flat one night, digging through her valuables and looking shocked at finding a bag with over a million pounds in it. They'd become friends, he'd even helped her to redecorate the flat in Hackney. Yes, there was something going on around Ruby, even if her friend didn't know she was broadcasting it.

"I need your help again." Said Ruby. "Just like before, I'm asking you and Spider to come with me."

"If you can find Spider. I heard a few rumours that he's in prison."

"He was.... Now he isn't. Spider is at home in Ealing now, though he will need a week or so to heal and get his strength back."

"Who else is going?"

"I don't know yet, my wunderkinds have lives of their own now, a few have grown up responsibilities. George can't be ignored either, he tends to panic if everyone vanishes."

They both exchanged a look and chuckled.

"Oh Ruby, I remember last time..... No, we can't have George panicking."

“No we can’t. We’ll decide, you me and Spider. I will definitely ask Sophie and Charlotte to come with me, they’d never forgive me if I didn’t.”

“You haven’t said where we’re going.” Said Sarah.

“So you’re going to come with me ?”

“Of course will.”

“Africa Sarah, we’re going to Kenya, the Rift Valley. To begin with that is.... Like our other trips, who knows where we might end up.”

“Oh dear, that sounds like more rickety railways and travelling in small boats.” Said Sarah.

“Probably..... Do you still want to come ?”

“Oh yes.”

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“Oh come on Sophie, you like Thai food too. The money is in the housekeeping tin.” Said Spider.

Spider AKA Rupert Bailey had thought about moving quite a few times, but he loved the fairly tatty house he rented in Ealing. For one thing the police had never found any of his hiding places and coppers tended to be creatures of habit. If they hadn’t found his Browning 9mm hidden under the rusted up lawn roller in the garden shed, they probably never would. He was currently sat in front of the TV and being looked after by Sophie.

“No, not until you tell me why you were in prison. No bullshit Spider, I’ll know if it’s another lie.”

“So you’re going to starve me ? It was probably your explosion to blow out the window that damaged my knee.”

Spider could just about get about, though it was genuinely painful. He was used to walking with a stick, the same knee had been damaged when he was a serving soldier in the British army. He had the army to thank for a lot of his transferable skills and the ability to cook a decent fry up. He looked at Sophie and thought she might give in, but her eyes hardened.

“No Spider, not this time.” She said. “Tell me or..... I’ll break your walking stick.”

She might well cry and hug him for an hour afterwards, but she’d definitely carry out her threat. Spider knew that Sophie might look like a sweet young girl, but underneath there was a cranky Russian woman who’d seen over a hundred and thirty winters. The need to know things precisely had always been there. It was tell her or sit in the chair and starve until Charlotte arrived to take over the next morning.

“Alright Sophie you win.” He said. “I’ll tell you, but I want a few beers to wash down the food.”

“The doctor said no alcohol while you’re on antibiotics.”

“Fine..... No beer, no explanation. I’ll sit here and pee on the floor after you break my stick.”

It was unfair, he knew most of the thirteen thought of his him as family, that slightly dodgy uncle with some useful skills to teach. He just didn’t want to cave in too quickly, it would set a bad precedent.

“Alright, I’ll get some beers while I’m out.” Said Sophie.

“You promise.”

“I promise.”

Sophie turned off the TV and sat on the floor in front of him, waiting.

“This is between us, agreed ?” He asked.

“I won’t tell anyone.”

“It really was a difference of opinion and it was nothing to do with drugs, not this time. Even gangs have loyalties, some people they owe an allegiance too. I wasn’t even aware of that when I went to Bucharest to collect the debt.”

“You were debt collecting ?” Asked Sophie.

“Yes I was, I like to think I’m good at it. Persuasion first of course, then.... You’ve been out with me on a few jobs Sophie, you’ve twisted a few arms for me. Anyway, I wouldn’t normally take a job that far from home, but it was for someone who puts a lot of work my way.”

“You mean a loan shark ?”

“Not really.....I suppose yes, but we’re talking about huge sums of money. The client loaned the money to a businessman who wanted it for a property deal in Estonia. Something went wrong back home, a few too many people asking too many questions. He vanished with the money, I’m told there’s a lot of that going on.”

“So you tracked him to Bucharest ? Brave to go after him alone.”

“I wasn’t daft enough to go alone. I took two experienced guys with me, one of them even spoke Romanian. We found the businessman and visited him in the early hours, as one does.”

“Did he pay up ?”

“Sort of..... He was full of apologies, sent a transfer for half of it to London while I was there. He promised faithfully to send the rest the following month. I came back to London and received half the recovery fee..... And guess what happened ?”

“He never sent the balance.”

“You’re good, if you ever need a job..... Yes the rest of the money didn’t arrive. At that point I had no idea how well connected the guy was, but I soon found out. I went back and they grabbed me in the hotel car park in Bucharest and injected me with something. I woke up in that hospital in Tallinn a day or so later. They seemed to have no idea what to do with me, I might have been there for years.... If you and Ruby hadn’t come to the rescue.”

Sophie had stayed at his house quite a few times, usually with one or two other wunderkinds. He trained them in the arts of extortion, debt collection and sometimes even how to inflict pain without leaving marks. She knew where the tin was kept, the housekeeping money. She took several twenty pound notes out and scrunched them up in the pocket of her jeans. Still she didn’t leave, she just stood there, looking at him.

“What beer do you want ?” She asked.

“Anything but Fosters, it smells like donkey piss.”

Still Sophie didn’t leave the room.

“Are we alright ?” He asked. “I told you the truth.”

Sophie came over and kissed him on the cheek.

“Sorry about the knee.” She said.

“No problem it’ll heal, everything heals. It’s better than still being in that prison.”

Spider wasn’t good at dealing with the emotional side of life, it was probably why he was nearly forty and lived alone. There had been a few women who’d stayed for a while. They all eventually left though, even Mary Dwyer, who he’d thought was ‘the one.’ He should have said something to Sophie, she obviously expected him to say something. Instead he just gave her his best lopsided smile and watched her leave to go to the Thai takeaway.

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“Oh, hello Constanze.” Said Ruby.

Ruby had to be in the right mood for a conversation with Kallina and being properly awake was essential. It was three in the morning and a familiar cat with grey fur, was purring and licking her nose.

“Alright, I’m awake. Where is your crazy owner ?”

"I can hear you, I'm in the lounge." Shouted Kallina.

An improvement in her manners, Kallina had been known to sit on the edge of her bed while she tried to wake up. Ruby cuddled Constanze for a minute or so, she was genuinely fond of the ancient feline. Named after Mozart's wife, who Kallina had been friends with. Most believed the cat was one in a long line named after Constanze Mozart. Ruby was one of the believers, who thought it was the same cat Kallina had owned since about eighteen forty.

"She's getting fat, you're overfeeding her again." Ruby shouted.

"It's her fault, she lies to me..... Telling me I haven't fed her."

Ruby sat on the edge of the bed and decided that she needed to wear something other than just a pair of panties. Kallina was a good friend, but Ruby still hunted in a cupboard for her robe. She banged her toe on a bed leg before finding her slippers. She cursed and then picked up the large heavy cat.

"I'm not cursing you Constanze. Not your fault you're owned by a crazy lady who turns up at three in the morning."

"It's nearly breakfast time in Baku."

That was the problem with trying to use sarcasm on Kallina, it bounced off her impenetrable wall of weird logic. Ruby carried the cat into the lounge and placed her on the sofa. At least Kallina had come as herself, facing Baba Yaga before her coffee was something Ruby dreaded.

"You could have at least made some coffee."

"I didn't like to intrude."

Ruby sighed and went into the kitchen.

"Are you hungry?"

"A little."

"I'll make cheese on toast and I think..... Yes, there's a tin of tuna in the cupboard for Constanze."

Kallina came and sat at the kitchen table while the coffee machine bubble and gurgled. It was hard to think of the pretty blonde girl as the same person who appeared as Baba Yaga, the ancient witch from the east. The svelte blonde sat at her table looked no more than twenty two, maybe twenty three when she was tired. Their talk would wait until the coffee and cheese on toast was ready. No need to call the cat, she must have smelt the tuna, or heard the tin opener. As they sat at the kitchen table, Ruby asked the question she knew could lead to some very unexpected events.

"So..... I love to see you, but why are you here?"

"I heard you're going to Africa."

Of course she had, Kallina visited all the other wunderkinds, she'd even been known to visit Spider in the wee small hours. The main problem with Kallina was her lack of reliability. You'd see her twice a week for months and then she'd vanish for months. Not that Ruby begrudged her a little eccentricity, Kallina had been the first mother to the thirteen. There had been twenty gifted children until they'd been hunted like animals. Seven had died and part of Kallina had died with them. No, Ruby didn't begrudge Kallina her eccentricity and rather erratic memory. In a way she'd earned the right to forget a lot of her very long past.

"Yes, though before you ask.... I'm not sure who I'm taking with me."

"Sophie told me what the device showed you. I want to go with you Ruby, I need to go."

Being asked was new and it was strangely polite. Kallina had a habit of turning up, even if no one had invited her.

"I have to admit, having you with us would be wonderful." Said Ruby. "It would be nice if you flew to Kenya with the rest of us, rather than appearing like a Jinn out of a bottle."

Kallina was pretending to be irritated, but Ruby saw her smile.

"I've told you before, Jinns don't come out of bottles. Yes, it would be nice to travel on a plane again, it's been a while. I rarely use any form of transport these days. Did I ever tell you that I was on Stalin's train as it thundered through Moscow?"

It was why Ruby liked to see Kallina when she was fully awake, her thought process could be like trying to follow a butterfly across a wild meadow.

"When you told me, you were among the crowd, watching the train thunder past."

"Then that is the truth Ruby.....Reality must sometimes be a little fluid."

Constanze climbed up onto her lap, licking her lips, breath smelling of tuna. Ruby drank her coffee and decided to risk a question that might give her a headache for days.

"Why did you name your cat after Mozart's wife?"

"Oh... well.... I wanted a kitten and she found one for me. It seemed the right thing to do.... To call the kitten Constanze."

"Is the cat on my lap the same cat?"

"What do you think?"

"I think she is."

"Then she is..... As I said, reality must always be a little fluid."

It was no answer really, but it was likely that even Kallina had forgotten the truth. Kallina pulled the conversation in another direction.

"Are you considering taking Max Krause with you?"

"No, I'm not even sure where he is."

"You know they dropped him into a hell hole of a prison in Africa. Your contacts with British intelligence could tell you exactly where in less than an hour."

"Yes I could, do you want me to break him out of jail too?"

"No..... Never. I came to beg you not to, that man is pure evil. He'll try to hurt the children again, I know he will."

Ruby wasn't completely certain where Max had been left to rot, though she'd heard rumours it was in a prison in Botswana.

"I have no intention of taking Max anywhere." She said. "As far as I'm concerned, he can die in prison."

"Good.....Any chance of more toast? I don't seem to remember eating yesterday, or the day before."

"There's cold pizza in the fridge, I could put it in the microwave."

"That sounds perfect." Said Kallina.

There was a bottle of pinot grigio in the fridge too. An odd breakfast to eat at around four in the morning, but Ruby thoroughly enjoyed it.

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To Ruby the building was where she worked, but she still got a buzz out of being there, looking at the brass plaque almost hidden in the entrance lobby.

'Polandrous Foundation – UK Registered Office.'

There were a few other company names, mostly dormant shell companies used as required. The Polandrous Foundation was real enough though, trading as a variety of legal entities around the globe. The Foundation controlled several trillion dollars worth of investments and more currency than several small nations. Not that you'd know that by looking at the anonymous looking building in Central London. Everything was clean and tidy, the paintwork wasn't peeling. It was a solid looking

commercial building, it just didn't look like the offices of a major multinational investment company. George Polandrous liked it that way, he liked the impression the building gave off. Sophie seemed impressed.

"Wow, you work here all the time ? Have you got your own office ?"

"Sort of, though someone else uses it most of the time." Said Ruby. "Officially I'm George's PA, though he has a whole team of people who do all the real work."

Charlotte was with her and she too was looking at the building with wide eyed wonder. Had she brought them to the office before ? Ruby felt a little guilty when she remembered it had been only once and that was just before they'd all left on their trip to Vietnam. George had known someone, who knew someone, who'd helped get passports for them.

"You've even got a man in uniform on the front desk." Said Charlotte.

"That's Len, he's really nice." Said Ruby.

She was feeling nervous, like an anxious mum on bring your kids to work day. They were intelligent adults though and they knew how live in the twenty first century. She knew that and yet....It had been so hard to resist telling them to be on their best behaviour.

"Hi Len, this is Sophie and Charlotte..... Do I need to get them badges or anything."

"No, Penny said to go straight up."

Penny had been George's genuine PA. After a few promotions and one threatened resignation, she was now the office manager. One of her dreams had come true with the promotion. George had given her a huge corner office with a great view of the City. Penny met them at the elevator on the top floor.

"Wow, I haven't seen you for a while..... I'm sure you've both grown." Said Penny.

"Ruby told us about the view from your office." Said Sophie.

"Can we see it ?" Asked Charlotte.

"Yes, though we'll need to be quick, George is expecting you."

Ruby knew the view, it was wonderful on a nice sunny day. The weather was gloomy and overcast, but everyone made the right noises.

"I can see The Gherkin." Said Sophie.

Ruby had taken them on a few trips around London, Charlotte had once helped her pull facts out of the mind of a foreign diplomat. They knew all the landmarks, though new ones were being built all the time. George had obviously decided to come and find them.

"You can see The Shard from my windows." He said. "Better in decent weather though."

"Sorry George, we got a bit distracted." Said Charlotte.

"No problem.... Nice to see you both."

George's office was ready for them, coffee, soft drinks and quite a few things to nibble. Ruby placed a list on the table, a list that had caused sleepless nights and a lot of arguments. It was the definitive list of who was going to Africa, staying in London to help George, or staying at home to look after their personal obligations and responsibilities.

"I do still wonder why you wanted to have a meeting before one of your trips, we've never had one before." Said George. "It feels as though you're preparing to be away for quite some time."

George and Penny were safe to tell anything to, they knew what the thirteen could do. They'd both seen satellite pictures of Charlotte on an island in the South China Sea. She'd been surrounded by fire and a massive electrical storm she'd created. Seeing that had stopped either of them thinking her wunderkinds were just harmless young adults.

"I have no idea how long we'll be away." Said Ruby. "Both times before I caused trouble for you and the Foundation. You parachuted into the Karakum desert to save me the first time, then there was China.....I know my actions nearly ruined your reputation and I regret that, deeply regret it."

"And you've more than made up for all that." Said George. "So, please forgive my self-interest, but who are you leaving in London, do I get Eugenie?"

Eugenie was fond of George, they all were, but she'd cried at being left behind. Not that Ruby would ever mention that to George.

"Yes, you get Eugenie." She said. "She is the best at pulling out the facts and memories you need from people's minds, and you've already worked with her a couple of times. I'm also leaving you Trudy and Lau. Lau can be aggressive, but he is as tough as old boots."

"Nothing stops Lau." Said Sophie.

"Think of Lau as your insurance, in case someone tries any rough stuff." Said Ruby. "Plus there are the staying at homes, those with responsibilities. Try not to call Lisa, she's about eight months pregnant."

"We all thought Isobel would be the first to get knocked up." Said Charlotte.

Everyone laughed, Spider had even started a few bets on it. They'd all thought Imran and Isobel would be the first to breed, they'd certainly practised a lot.

"Leave me their current contact numbers." Said Penny.

"How many are you taking with you?" Asked George.

"Seven and then of course there's Spider and Sarah. Kallina has said she'll fly out with us, though she has been known to change her mind. Having her with us would be brilliant, but I'm not relying on her turning up."

There was also the woman Ruby had broken out of prison, Anna. Explaining her was just too complicated and Ruby didn't know how to explain why she'd allowed Anna to latch onto her like some kind of acolyte.

"So, do you need help with passports and visas?" Asked Penny.

"Yes please, I made you a list."

"I don't remember her..... Who is Anna Kaloyanova?" Asked Penny.

Ruby pushed a battered old Bulgarian passport across the desk.

"You can get the picture from that..... Can we just say it's complicated and leave it at that?" Asked Ruby.

"Ruby got herself a stalker." Said Sophie.

"Fine, I think we owe you the odd complication with no questions asked." Said George. "When do you plan on leaving?"

"As soon as we can." Said Ruby. "We're waiting for Spider to heal up really, he had a bit of an accident in Tallinn."

"I blew him up." Said Sophie.

No one laughed, they all knew Sophie.

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Sarah Simmons was travelling the way she liked to travel. First class would have been better, but that wasn't low profile enough for Ruby. A British Airways direct flight to Nairobi, or LHR – NBO as it said on the stickers on their luggage, was how she preferred to travel. No small boats being shot at or threatening to sink in a storm, no rattling trains with no proper bathroom. She could sit back, watch the movie and enjoy the nine hour flight. Only one thing was blighting her journey.

"Why are the movies always such crap?" Asked Ruby. "Bland load of rubbish."

Sarah might have enjoyed moaning about the terrible movie selection, if it hadn't been for that one thing blighting her journey. It was a woman, the stalker Ruby had brought home from Tallinn. She was sat next to Spider, in just the right spot where Sarah had the perfect view of them canoodling, or whatever it was that Anna was doing.

"She touched his hand." She said.

"Ignore them, go to sleep if it bothers you."

"Of course it doesn't worry me."

Ruby stopped fiddling with the entertainment system and looked at her for a second or so.

"Yeah right." Said Ruby.

"What do you mean by that?"

"How many times have you and Spider tried to make it work Sarah? It must be at least a dozen and it never works. You chew him up and spit him out..... Yet you resent anyone else having him."

"No I don't."

"Yeah right."

"Stop saying that."

Sarah thumped back in her seat, it was only way she could think of to show mild annoyance. There were six of them on that flight, all sitting in different parts of the economy section. Spider and Anna were in front and to their right, while Sophie and Kallina were sat a few rows behind them. Sarah hadn't thought Kallina would turn up, but Ruby had faith in her. It was Ruby's idea to spit everyone up on different flights and airlines and it wasn't all to do with airline watch lists and Spider's dubious passport. Ruby worked to something she called the Lynyrd Skynyrd principle.

"I'd never put all my precious eggs in one flying basket."

Everyone was going to meet up at the hotel, Ruby had even booked a proper meeting room. This trip didn't have to be clandestine, they weren't about to invade anywhere, or at least Sarah hoped they weren't. No good, Anna leaning in towards Spider was driving her crazy.

"Do you think they're kissing?"

Ruby sighed, her long suffering sigh, which Sarah knew all too well.

"Would you like an excuse to swap seats with her?"

"It's not that it bothers me.... It doesn't."

"Go and tell Anna I need to see her.....I'll think of something to talk to her about."

"Alright."

The bitch had her hand on Spider's leg when she got to their seats. Spider was hers, everyone knew that. They went through a lot of off and on periods in their relationship, but he was still hers.

"Ruby sent me to swap seats with you, she needs to talk to you."

"Ok."

That was it, she didn't even say goodbye to Spider. The seat was warm and smelt of the perfume Anna used. It felt like invading the hunting ground of a fellow predator.

"She seems nice." She said.

"Yes, she is."

How long was Ruby going to keep Anna busy? She should have asked of course. Sarah decided to do away with subtlety and move straight up to seduction.

"Do you ever think about why we keep getting back together?" She asked.

She could almost feel him go into emotional stealth mode. It was unfair really, she knew he wasn't comfortable dealing with feelings and emotions.

“Sometimes..... I got the feeling that you’d stepped off the carousel for good, after our last break up.”

“I had intended to..... It’s just that when it works.....We have something really special.” She said.

“Paris was good, the time we went with Ruby.” Said Spider. “I can remember you getting angry when I assumed we only needed one hotel room.”

“I was only pretending to be angry..... That was a nice trip.”

“We’ll both have rooms this time..... But it would be nice if one of them wasn’t used that often.”

Probably the least romantic way anyone had ever propositioned her, but it was Spider.

“I’d like that too.” She said.

Sarah leant towards him and they kissed, the sort of kiss that meant Anna would have to find someone else to keep her company in Nairobi.

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